DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 471 815 CE 083 638

AUTHOR	Matus-Grossman, Lisa; Gooden, Susan
TITLE	Opening Doors: Students' Perspectives on Juggling Work, Family, and College.
INSTITUTION	Manpower Demonstration Research Corp., New York, NY.
SPONS AGENCY	Metropolitan Life Foundation.; Annie E. Casey Foundation, Baltimore, MD.; Ford Foundation, New York, NY.; William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, Palo Alto, CA.; Joyce Foundation, Chicago, IL.; Lumina Foundation for Education, Indianapolis, IN.; Smith Richardson Foundation, Inc., Greensboro, NC.; Alcoa Foundation, Pittsburgh, PA.; Ambrose Monell Foundation, New York, NY.; George Gund Foundation, Cleveland, OH.; Grable Foundation, Pittsburgh, PA.; New York Times Foundation, NY.; Surdna Foundation, Inc., New York, NY.; Open Society Inst., New York, NY.; Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, Flint, MI.
PUB DATE	2002-07-00
NOTE	122p.; Written with Melissa Wavelet, Melisa Diaz, and Reishma Seupersad. Opening Doors Project also funded by the KnowledgeWorks Foundation. Dissemination also supported by the Atlantic Philanthropies and Starr Foundation.
AVAILABLE FROM	Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation, 16 East 34 Street, New York, New York 10016. Tel: 212-532-3200; Web site: http://www.mdrc.org. For full text: http://www.mdrc.org/Reports2002/opendoors_perspectives/jugglingwo rk.pdf.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Research (143)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC05 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Academic Persistence; *Access to Education; Adult Students; *College Environment; *Community Colleges; Education Work Relationship; Educational Attitudes; Enrollment Influences; Family Problems; Family School Relationship; *Family Work Relationship; Focus Groups; Partnerships in Education; Paying for College; School Community Relationship; School Holding Power; Special Needs Students; *Student Attitudes; *Student College Relationship; Student Educational Objectives; Student Financial Aid; Student Motivation; Student Needs; Student Personnel Services; Two Year College Students; Two Year Colleges
IDENTIFIERS	Cabrillo College CA; City University of New York La Guardia Comm Coll; Macomb Community College MI; Portland Community College OR; Sinclair Community College OH; Valencia Community College FL

ABSTRACT

Information gathered in focus groups of current, former, and potential students at six community colleges was used to explore institutional and personal access and retention issues faced by students seeking a workable balance of their college, work, and family responsibilities. The six community colleges were as follows: Cabrillo College (Aptos, California); LaGuardia Community College (Long Island, New York); Macomb Community College (Clinton Township, Michigan); Portland Community College (Portland, Oregon); Sinclair Community College (Dayton,

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Ohio); and Valencia Community College (Orlando, Florida). The following were among the main themes that emerged from the focus groups: (1) working students typically take more than 2 years to complete college; (2) financial aid is a major factor affecting enrollment decisions; (3) balancing work, family, and college is difficult; (4) students need on-campus academic and personal support; (5) a gap exists between the services available to students and students' awareness of them; and (6) students view individual faculty members as the "front line" of their community college experience. Educational, financial aid, student service, and community partnership approaches to helping community college students juggle their college, work and family responsibilities were identified. Selected results from phone interviews with focus group participants are appended. (Contains 14 tables/boxes and 46 references.) (MN)

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OPENING DOORS
Students' Perspectives on Juggling Work, Family, and College

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Lisa Matus-Grossman
Susan Gooden
with
Melissa Wavelet
Melisa Diaz
Reishma Seupersad

July 2002

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Funders of the Opening Doors Project

Annie E. Casey Foundation
Ford Foundation
The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation
Joyce Foundation
KnowledgeWorks Foundation
Lumina Foundation for Education
Charles Stewart Mott Foundation
Smith Richardson Foundation

The publication and distribution of this report were made possible by a grant from the MetLife Foundation.

Dissemination of MDRC publications is also supported by the following foundations that help finance MDRC's public policy outreach and expanding efforts to communicate the results and implications of our work to policymakers, practitioners, and others: The Atlantic Philanthropies; the Alcoa, Ambrose Monell, Ford, George Gund, Grable, New York Times Company, Starr, and Surdna Foundations; and the Open Society Institute.

The findings and conclusions in this report do not necessarily represent the official positions or policies of the funders.

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Overview

Community colleges offer low-wage workers opportunities to increase their earnings and improve their family's overall economic well-being by enhancing their marketable job skills with advanced education and training. Yet many people who could benefit from community college programs either do not enroll or drop out before completing their coursework. This study uses information gathered in focus groups at six community colleges from current, former, and potential students (most of them single parents) to explore institutional and personal access and retention issues they face as they seek a workable balance of college, work, and family responsibilities. The focus group findings have important implications for the community colleges, employers, and policymakers who work with these nontraditional students.

Key Findings

- Focus group participants identified stable child care; personal support from family members, peers, and college faculty and staff; and accommodating employers as leading factors influencing their ability to stay in college, complete their programs of study within expected time frames, or enroll in the first place. Expanding on-campus support services and introducing new course formats that offer modularized or short-term training options with more flexible schedules may lower these barriers and enable students to complete courses more quickly.

- Although the direct costs of tuition and books are significant factors in the ability of low-wage students to attend community colleges, focus group participants emphasized that lost wages from having to reduce work hours strongly influenced their ability to afford college. College administrators and policymakers may want to consider offering new forms of financial aid that help low-wage working students meet direct education-related costs as well as replace lost income.

- With regard to community college institutional supports, focus group participants who were able to take advantage of academic and personal counseling and flexible on-campus child care (that offered extended hours of coverage and could accommodate both infants and older children) described these services as enormously valuable. Other students, however, either were not able to avail themselves of these services, were unaware that the services existed, or were unsure whether they would be eligible for them. In addition to expanding the availability of these supports, colleges may want to increase their outreach and marketing efforts.

- Students participating in the focus groups reported that they had difficulty accessing work-based safety net programs such as Food Stamps, Medicaid, Earned Income Credits, Section 8 housing vouchers, and child care subsidies. Because these programs can provide key supports for work and education, colleges could improve students' access to them by developing partnerships with public agencies and community-based organizations.

The Opening Doors project has been made possible through the cooperation of Cabrillo College, LaGuardia Community College, Macomb Community College, Portland Community College, Sinclair Community College, and Valencia Community College and their public agency partners; the focus group participants; and the financial support of the Annie E. Casey, Ford, William and Flora Hewlett, Joyce, KnowledgeWorks, Lumina Foundation for Education, MetLife, Charles Stewart Mott, and Smith Richardson Foundations.

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Preface

All levels of government are grappling with how to provide low-wage workers, or the working poor, with opportunities for career advancement and wage progression. Since the passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) in 1996, increasing numbers of current and former welfare recipients have been joining the low-wage workforce, so that career mobility is an important concern for welfare-to-work efforts as well. While there is a strong correlation between college credentials and higher earnings, many low-wage workers do not pursue postsecondary education — and many of those who do, do not complete it.

Through the Opening Doors to Earning Credentials initiative, the Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation (MDRC) is exploring ways to increase community college access and retention for nontraditional students, including low-wage workers. The first publication from the project, co-published with the National Governors Association, is entitled *Opening Doors: Expanding Educational Opportunities for Low-Income Workers;* it presented promising state and local practices and policy changes that might improve postsecondary enrollments and completion rates. The present report builds on this earlier work by sharing the educational and life experiences of current, former, and potential low-wage working students as they themselves described in focus groups.

This report also offers potential policy and program strategies to address the barriers to education that the focus group participants described. It raises important questions about traditional college scheduling formats and services and whether it is realistic to expect full-time workers to succeed in postsecondary programs when faced with the competing demands of work and family, the opportunity costs of reduced income from cutting back work hours to attend college, and the often unmet needs for financial assistance.

Although community colleges do offer a range of financial, academic, and personal support services, these findings suggest that some of the issues raised by low-wage working students could be addressed by the combination of marketing existing services better and offering supplemental services by partnering with other public and private service providers. The options that college administrators and policymakers might consider include:

- Making new or expanded forms of existing financial aid more accessible to working students
- Adopting more flexible and faster course delivery formats
- Expanding campus-based college and community support services and benefits (including child care)
- Creating bridges between noncredit and credit programs
- Designing lifelong learning opportunities and career pathways

We are grateful to the six community colleges and their public agency partners for their assistance in this study and for allowing other institutions to benefit from their experiences. We also thank the focus group participants, whose willingness to talk about sensitive personal issues and challenges made this report possible and insightful.

Robert Ivry
Senior Vice President

Acknowledgments

We are grateful to the administrators and other staff at the six college sites in the Opening Doors study, along with their public agency partners, who contributed a great deal of time and effort to this project. In particular, we thank Nan Poppe and Kate Dins at Portland Community College; Jerry Burns at Adult and Family Services in Portland; Heidi Soderberg and Robert Earhart at South East Works; James Jacobs and Donna Petras at Macomb Community College; John Bierbusse and Linda McClatcher at the Macomb–St. Clair Workforce Development Board; Charlotte Ferrari at Michigan's Family Independence Agency; Dena Taylor, Catherine LeChance, and Terrence Willet at Cabrillo College; Carol Walberg at the Santa Cruz Human Resources Agency and Emily Ballie at the Workforce Santa Cruz County Career Center; Linda Gilberto and Barbara Astone at LaGuardia Community College; Karen Witt and Patricia Ewald at Sinclair Community College; Laura Hebert at Valencia Community College; and Lisa Portelli at Workforce Central Florida. They and their coworkers helped us recruit focus group participants and hosted the focus groups, provided information about college and community programs and services, and gave important feedback on this report. We also thank the focus group participants who spoke with us in each of the six sites; their willingness to share their personal experiences has made this report possible.

Robert Ivry at MDRC directed the project, provided much appreciated advice and guidance, and reviewed the report. This study also benefited greatly from the contributions of Crystal Barnes, Christine Barrow, Katherine Donley, Nikita Hunter, Vivian Mateo, Hermenegildo Santiago, and Betsy Tessler at MDRC; and Nakeina Douglas and Aimee Florsch at Virginia Tech. They recruited focus group participants and helped administer discussion sessions, conducted phone interviews and interviews with administrators, provided technical support, and analyzed data. We are grateful for the contributions of others at MDRC, including Gilda Azurdia, our programmer; and Arthur Chachuna, Shirley James, and the staff who processed survey data. We also thank Mona Grant at MDRC and Brinda Ross-Myatt at Virginia Tech for giving much needed administrative assistance. Gordon Berlin, Thomas Brock, Crystal Byndloss, and Louis Richman at MDRC provided guidance on the project and reviewed the report. Barbara Goldman advised us on research design and data collection issues.

Thanks are also due Eileen Hayes, who facilitated six of the focus groups and assisted with administrator interviews and college site visits; and to Constance Kim, who conducted phone interviews. We are grateful to the following advisors and reviewers: Julie Strawn at the Center on Law and Social Policy; Norton Grubb at the University of California at Berkeley School of Education; Thomas Bailey at the Community College Research Center at Columbia University's Teachers College; Cecelia Rouse at the Woodrow Wilson School of Princeton University; and Thomas Flint at the Council on Adult and Experiential Learning. Our thanks go also to Victoria Choitz at FutureWorks for additional information about financial aid and for reviewing the report.

Robert Weber edited the report, and Stephanie Cowell prepared it for publication.

The Authors

Executive Summary

An important public policy challenge of the twenty-first century is how to increase the opportunities for career mobility and wage progression among low-wage workers. Community colleges have the potential to play an important role in addressing this challenge, since receiving an associate's degree or vocational certificate is related to higher earnings. Yet many low-wage workers do not capitalize on the opportunities offered by community colleges. Either they do not apply or a high proportion of those who do apply and enroll drop out. In presenting findings from Opening Doors to Earning Credentials — a qualitative study that examines community college access and retention issues for low-wage working parents — this report captures the voice of the consumer: current, former, and potential students.

The Scope and Methods of the Opening Doors Study

Based on their demonstrated commitment and capacity to make college offerings more accessible to nontraditional students, including low-wage workers, six community colleges across the nation were selected for the Opening Doors study:

- Cabrillo College in Aptos, California
- LaGuardia Community College in Long Island City, New York
- Macomb Community College in Clinton Township, Michigan
- Portland Community College in Portland, Oregon
- Sinclair Community College in Dayton, Ohio
- Valencia Community College in Orlando, Florida

Across these six colleges, eighteen focus groups were conducted involving three groups of low-wage workers: (1) current students enrolled in community college credit-granting programs, (2) former students previously enrolled in community college who left and have not since earned a credential, and (3) potential students who have never attended a credit-granting program at a community college. A total of 131 individuals participated in the focus groups, which consisted mostly of women, between ages 21 and 40, who are parents; they had worked within the prior six months in jobs earning low wages.[1] This sample is racially and ethnically diverse overall.

[1]Former students had to have been working in low-wage jobs when they previously attended college but could be earning higher wages when they participated in the focus groups.

Several important differences were found across groups:

- Current students prioritized education over employment. They sought jobs that fit their school schedules, which often meant working part time. Almost all current students had a high school diploma or General Educational Development (GED) certificate. Current students had fewer children than members of the other two groups.
- Former students prioritized employment over education. Like the current students, nearly all former students had high school credentials. They fell between the other two groups in terms of having family relationships and stability in their personal lives, and they earned higher wages and exhibited more job stability, on average.
- Compared with the other two groups, potential students had fewer family relationships, less life stability, and more crises (such as pending evictions, financial problems, or family issues). Many of the potential students were not as prepared academically to attend college; only half of them had a high school diploma or GED.

Main Themes from the Focus Groups

Overall, most focus group participants believed that a college education would be a valuable investment for increasing their opportunities for career mobility and wage progression. They also felt that obtaining a college education would set a good example for their children. Why, then, do relatively few low-wage workers enroll in community college and earn a credential? No single dominant factor accounted for these participants' decisions about enrollment in or withdrawal from community college. Rather, a constellation of personal, situational, community college, and external factors seems to explain their low enrollment and completion rates. The following major themes from the focus groups convey the various factors that constitute this larger constellation.

Working students typically take more than two years to complete college. The traditional image of a "one-year" certificate program or a "two-year" associate's degree is not the norm for low-wage working students. Most students in the study combined education with full-time or part-time employment. Many current and former students described taking longer than they initially expected to complete their programs (more than two years or even more than five years to complete an associate's degree, for example). They took time off from college to accommodate work or family demands or to earn additional income.

Financial aid — to cover tuition and related costs and to replace lost wages — is a major factor affecting enrollment decisions. Many low-wage working students said that they could not attend college without financial assistance. Besides needing standard financial aid services, such as tuition assistance and money for books and supplies, they reported an important "income gap" that resulted from reducing work hours to attend college. When considering enrollment, participants quickly began calculating the short-term economic implications for their families. For single parents especially, this income gap might mean the inability to meet their children's essential needs. Within the realm of standard financial aid services, not all low-wage working students are eligible for such assistance. Some participants exceeded the income qualifications, despite an inability to pay for tuition or other college costs on their own; some were attending school less than half time and thus were not eligible for sufficient assistance; some had defaulted on past student loans or grants; and some were on probation due to poor academic performance in the past.

Balancing work, family, and college is difficult. By definition, the study group included students who were working and had dependent children. Participants' lives were fragile, and a single event might lead to dropping out or taking time off from college. Major personal factors included child care issues (such as its availability and quality, parents' comfort level with the number of hours a child was in care, and varying degrees of understanding on the part of instructors when child care emergencies arose); family and peer relationships (which, when supportive, can make a huge difference); and employers' support (such as flexible work schedules). Some participants mentioned other factors, including discrimination, housing, transportation, and physical or mental health issues (involving themselves or close family members). Some participants — mostly the potential students — also mentioned such barriers as domestic violence and legal issues (usually relating to immigration).

Students need on-campus academic and personal support. Focus group participants expressed the need for a combination of supports and services on campus, including academic and personal counseling as well as financial aid advisement. Some students required special programs to accommodate specific needs, and some called for ongoing counseling rather than isolated, specific counseling services — as might be triggered, for example, by a drop in academic performance.

A gap exists between the services that are available to students and students' awareness of them. Some participants across all the groups — especially the potential students — were not aware of existing college- or community-based resources to help them attend college, including financial aid, personal or academic counseling, and special programs.

Students view individual faculty members as the "front line" of their community college experiences. Students' impressions of their community college are shaped largely by

their daily interactions with instructional faculty. Students in the study provided examples of ways in which individual instructors' policies regarding attendance, group versus individual assignments, course load, and late assignments greatly influenced their ability to complete a course. They gave examples of how faculty were instrumental in aiding them when employment or parenting demands conflicted with school responsibilities, and they also conveyed their experiences with faculty who did not take such conflicts into consideration.

Some students require remediation. Some participants expressed a general need for remediation in order to meet course prerequisites or address low English proficiency. Low basic skills or the lack of a high school diploma or GED meant that other participants, particularly potential students, had not been able to meet college entry requirements or to access specific credit-granting occupational courses or programs.

Complex child care needs affect a parent's ability to attend college. Most student parents expressed the need for child care on campus. Even campuses that offered child care had important gaps in services. For example, many child care centers had limited capacity, did not offer care during late-evening and weekend classes, or had age restrictions that included toddlers but not infants or older children. While most parents said that they needed child care on campus, many were also concerned about leaving their children in formal daycare arrangements for additional hours, beyond the hours that their children already spent in care while the parents were at work. Participants asked: At what point am I leaving my child in care too much? Similarly, parents of adolescents were concerned about their children's supervision while they attended evening or weekend classes.

Work-based safety net services provide critical support but can be difficult to access for working students. Although such benefits as Food Stamps, Medicaid, Earned Income Credits (EICs), Section 8 housing vouchers, and child care subsidies are important supports that enable low-wage workers to combine work and college, students can be deterred from seeking help from public programs because agency hours conflict with their job or college schedules, there is often the need for repeat visits, or additional child care must be arranged.

Implications of the Study's Findings

The insights from the focus group participants, combined with lessons from other research, suggest promising strategies that could improve low-wage working students' access to and retention in postsecondary programs. Considering the heterogeneity of the experiences, personal and financial circumstances, and academic preparedness of these current, former, and potential students, postsecondary education may not be for everyone at a given moment in time. Nonetheless, the design and implementation of the following educational, financial aid, and stu-

dent support service strategies could reach potential students and increase the success rates of current students.

Educational Approaches

Providing bridges between noncredit, remedial classes and credit courses. Participants described the need for remediation to meet college entry requirements or course prerequisites. Remedial programs are often offered on a noncredit basis, and their attrition rates can be very high, so that many students never move from the noncredit to the credit-granting side of the institution. In order to create bridges between noncredit and credit remedial classes, and to provide greater access to remediation, options include improving the quality of noncredit remedial programs (perhaps by integrating remedial and occupational skills) and improving articulation between noncredit and credit classes.

Designing nontraditional course formats. Colleges can work with their public and private partners to create flexible scheduling options that make it easier for nontraditional students to complete certificate and degree programs more quickly. Examples include modular or short-term certificate programs with career ladders in high-growth fields, such as information technology and the health professions; various combinations of distance learning and on-campus classes; and open-entry/open-exit, self-paced, or other flexible formats.

Creating lifelong learning opportunities and career pathways. Colleges and their public or private partners can package nontraditional course offerings to create lifelong learning opportunities and solid career pathways. Such programs delineate various short-term training options or single courses that working students can take in a particular career area, and relevant job opportunities are connected to each "rung" in the career ladder. Students can enter or exit at multiple points, and can return for additional education, as they continue to build on their existing college credentials.

Financial Aid Approaches

The study's findings suggest the need for new or expanded forms of financial aid for working adults and nontraditional students that address both the direct costs of going to school (tuition, books, and supplies) and the opportunity costs of lost wages by reducing work hours to attend school. Potential strategies include working with state governments on new forms of tuition assistance and financial incentives (targeted at low-wage workers or students attending less than half time); expanding work-study programs (by allowing more work hours or providing higher wages and by placements with off-campus employers); and providing employer incentives to make tuition reimbursement programs more available to low-wage working students.

Student Support Service Approaches

Mounting aggressive outreach and marketing campaigns. To bridge the information gap and make working students aware of the support services available, colleges may need to consider more aggressive outreach and marketing campaigns. It may be useful to target low-wage working students specifically, by marketing through community groups, civic organizations, churches, and employers.

Providing on-campus child care. Focus group participants clearly articulated a need for increased availability of high-quality child care that better matches the needs of student parents. Desired services include drop-in child care, evening and weekend care, infant care, and on-campus programs for older children and teenagers.

Creating on-campus student support centers. Colleges could work with local welfare and workforce agencies and with community-based organizations to provide academic and personal counseling, financial aid assistance, on-campus child care, and access to work-based safety net services so that low-wage working students can access all the benefits to which they are entitled (such as Food Stamps, EICs, health insurance, and child care subsidies). Centralized support services would give students one-on-one help in navigating the college system, finding help for ongoing personal problems, and dealing with external agencies.

Providing a welcoming, nondiscriminatory environment. To address the discrimination issues raised by focus group participants, community college administrators and faculty should promote practices that foster a welcoming environment. Students should not be discouraged from participating in any program because of personal characteristics like age, gender, race/ethnicity, or family status. Colleges can create ongoing diversity training programs for administrators, faculty, and staff; on-campus supports to assist students who face unwelcoming classroom environments (including adult reentry programs); and zero-tolerance policies enforced by senior administrators.

Community Partnerships

Colleges will likely need to work with additional partners — including employers, public welfare and workforce agencies, and community-based organizations — to implement the kinds of strategies outlined above. Such partnerships could be structured in various ways: by locating staff of agencies and community-based organizations (or even entire public agencies) on campus; by placing college staff in community locations to recruit potential students, provide instruction, and offer academic or counseling services; and by coordinating resources in ways that expand existing programs and support services for low-wage working students.

Chapter 1

The Policy Context and Community College Sites

This chapter examines the research and policy context of the Opening Doors to Earning Credentials study. It begins by discussing low-wage workers, the returns on postsecondary education, the ways in which community colleges are well suited to serve low-wage workers, and the attrition and enrollment patterns of low-wage workers and other nontraditional students. Then the chapter describes the Opening Doors study and the six community college sites selected for it. An overview of subsequent chapters concludes the discussion.

Working but "There just isn't enough money"

> I have two boys and I have to be their mother and their father. There just isn't enough money. I don't even know what money looks like. I get my check, it goes in the bank and then it goes to the bills. . . . At least we got a place to live for another month. I just don't see anything right now happening. I would like to go to school. I would like to do something with my life.
>
> — A potential student, responding to a question about her career goals

As the mother quoted above makes clear, simply working has not been enough to raise the family income of low-wage workers (the "working poor") to a self-sufficient level. Some research suggests that low-wage workers are growing as a group within the overall workforce and that their real wages have been declining in value.[1] Other research suggests that the percentage of low-wage workers at or below the federal poverty level was declining in the late 1990s.[2]

While the focus of this report is on low-wage workers, it is important to acknowledge the role of welfare reform since the late 1990s in highlighting the plight of low-wage workers, some of whom are current or former welfare recipients. Research on welfare recipients who left public assistance for low-wage work suggests that employment is often intermittent, at nontraditional hours (evenings, weekends), and without a fixed schedule.[3] In addition, working welfare recipients receive little or no increase in income or promotion opportunities; their welfare benefits are merely replaced by low wages.[4] This is especially true for blacks and Hispanics, who together earn less than whites and have fewer employment opportunities.[5] Another recent study

[1]Bernstein and Hartmann, 2000.
[2]U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2001.
[3]Strawn and Martinson, 2000.
[4]Strawn and Martinson, 2000.
[5]Gooden, 1998, 1999; Holzer and Stoll, 2000.

of current and former welfare recipients found that low-wage workers in four urban cities are maintaining stable employment but that their jobs offer few employer-sponsored benefits and very low wages. Work alone is usually not sufficient to raise their family income above the poverty level.[6] As a result, states are grappling with the growing realization that, given welfare reform's lifetime time limits on cash assistance receipt, it is critical to get low-wage workers into career pathways that offer real opportunities for higher wages and advancement.[7]

Likewise, simply encouraging low-wage working families to work more hours is not going to be enough to bring most of them to a higher standard of living, since many already work full time or even longer hours, and others are working for such low wages that additional hours would only marginally increase their income.[8] Instead, one potential solution may be to upgrade their skills and education levels in order to give them access to career pathways with advancement opportunities, better wages, and benefits. As this report indicates, the first challenge is to attract low-wage workers who have never attended college to postsecondary programs; once enrolled, the second challenge is to retain them.

Who Are Low-Wage Workers?

Low-wage workers make up a considerable segment of the U.S. population, but they are not uniformly defined as a group. One complication is that the low-wage labor market includes many categories of workers who would not be considered low income or otherwise disadvantaged (for example, dependent teenagers and secondary wage-earners from middle- or higher-income families). Also, depending on how the "working poor" are defined as a group, estimates of their number in the U.S. economy range widely.[9] Despite the variety of definitions available, research suggests that low-wage workers share several important demographic, employment, and educational characteristics. Women, racial/ethnic minorities, and individuals without any college education are overrepresented among the low-wage working population.[10] One study found that working-poor families are more likely to have children than other types of families, are less likely to receive public assistance and slightly more likely to receive child support than unemployed poor families, and on average work full-time hours throughout the

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[6]Polit et al., 2001.

[7]Traditional welfare-to-work programs have not been altogether successful in this regard. MDRC's previous research suggests that, with the exception of studies of financial incentives, most welfare-to-work programs produced modest gains in employment and earnings but that earning increases were not large enough to raise families out of poverty (see Bloom and Michalopoulos, 2001; Gueron and Pauly, 1991).

[8]Acs, Philips, and McKenzie, 2000.

[9]Acs, Philips, and McKenzie, 2000.

[10]Bernstein and Hartmann, 2000.

year but at lower wage levels than nonpoor families.[11] Several occupational areas — including services, farming, forestry, and fishing as well as operators, fabricators, and laborers — have relatively high rates of working-poor employees.[12]

There are a number of public work support programs to help income-eligible low-wage workers supplement their income, including Food Stamps, Medicaid, housing assistance, child care subsidies, Earned Income Credits (EICs), and "make work pay" financial incentive programs. Not all low-wage workers are income-eligible for these programs, however — especially if they have income above the federal poverty level — and many low-wage workers apparently do not access all available supports. One recent study found that although many low-wage workers may be eligible for Food Stamps, Medicaid, housing assistance, and child care subsidies, the majority of participants were not accessing these supports.[13] Moreover, even for workers who do receive them, the supports may need to be paired with career advancement strategies, including education and training, in order to move families out of poverty over the long term.

Indeed, one impediment to finding better job opportunities and wage progression for low-wage workers may be their education levels. One study found that only about 10 percent of the low-wage working population have a college degree, compared with 36 percent of higher-income families.[14] The relationship between educational attainment and low-wage worker status is also differentiated by gender and race/ethnicity, with women and blacks being more likely to be working poor at various levels of education than men and whites.[15] Increasingly, the labor market requires higher levels of skills and education credentials to access better-paying jobs that offer benefits and promotion possibilities.[16]

The education issue is a complex one, since not all low-wage workers have low skills.[17] For workers who already have some postsecondary experience, the issue may be to attract them to college and retain them there until degree completion, while for the small percentage of workers with a bachelor's degree or workers without sufficient basic skills to meet college ad-

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[11]Acs, Phillips, and McKenzie, 2000.

[12]U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2001.

[13]Polit et al., 2001.

[14]"Higher income" was defined as being above 200 percent of the federal poverty level (Acs, Phillips, and McKenzie, 2000).

[15]U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2001.

[16]Carnevale and Rose (2001) indicate that the majority of workers with a bachelor's degree are involved in "elite jobs," whereas those with only a high school diploma or without any high school credential have access to much lower-quality positions.

[17]One recent study (Carnevale and Rose, 2001) estimated that 25 percent of low-wage workers in their study sample lacked a high school diploma; 35 percent had only a high school diploma; and 40 percent had some postsecondary education (although most had not earned a four-year degree).

missions requirements, approaches other than education may be required in order to improve their earnings prospects.

Returns on Postsecondary Education

There is compelling correlation evidence that additional years of schooling and advanced education credentials are associated with higher earnings. Students who complete an associate's degree or certificate program earn more than those with a high school diploma or General Educational Development (GED) certificate, and those with a bachelor's degree earn more than those with a two-year degree or certificate.[18] A review of research found that while some studies show no returns on earning a certificate, others studies indicate that there is some payoff, especially for women.[19] There appears to be some benefit to attending college without completing a credential. Obtaining 30 credits (about a year of college study) has been shown to have some benefit in terms of increased earnings, although not as much benefit as completing a degree.[20] In general, the labor market returns on any postsecondary credential are moderated by such factors as the occupational area of the degree and whether graduates find employment in a related job field.[21]

Why the Community College?

Community colleges have a long history of providing the greatest access to postsecondary education to disadvantaged groups in the United States. With their open-door policy, low tuition, locations often near low-income communities, and flexible course schedules, community colleges are the primary point of entry to higher education for nontraditional students, including low-wage workers.[22] Community colleges also play an important community-building role by offering educational, enrichment, and career opportunities to local residents. Further,

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[18]One study (Grubb, 1999a) found 18 percent better earnings for men who completed an associate's degree program and 23 percent better earnings for women, compared with people who had only a high school diploma. Earning a bachelor's degree can yield an even higher payoff; another study (Kane and Rouse, 1995) found that, compared with high school graduates, men who had a bachelor's degree earned 28 percent more annually and women who had one earned 39 percent more.

[19]Whatever the returns on certificates, they appear to be much smaller than that of an associate's degree or a higher-level degree, and they are likely influenced by occupational area (Grubb, 1999a).

[20]Kane and Rouse, 1995; Grubb, 1999a.

[21]Grubb (1999a) reports that the fields with the biggest returns on an associate's degree appear to be in engineering and computers, for men, and in business and health, for women; for both genders, the biggest returns on having a bachelor's degree appear to be in business, engineering, computers, health, math, and science. Grubb also shows that associate's degrees in academic subjects appear to have much smaller returns than those in the top occupational areas and that both kinds of associate's degrees have educational returns in terms of providing the opportunity to transfer to four-year college programs.

[22]Dougherty, 1994.

community colleges possess many of the elements of successful education and training programs: the ability to adapt to local labor market conditions; a full range of education and training options (including remedial, vocational, and academic programs); support services for a wide range of students; and opportunities for lifelong learning, with articulation between a two-year associate's program and transfer to a four-year college program.[23]

Multiple Missions and Constituencies

Community colleges typically seek to fulfill a broad range of missions, which were characterized in one study as encompassing academic education (including the transfer function to four-year colleges); vocational education; contract education for local employers and economic development; remediation; and community service (including the provision of social services).[24] The study describes the community college as standing above other institutions in terms of "flexibility in adapting to the community's needs" but as still having to integrate programs and services across these broad mission areas.[25]

Community colleges offer a wide range of services to attract and retain students. While the array, nature, and capacity of services vary greatly among colleges, typical offerings include registration and admissions, recruitment and retention services (usually related to placement in appropriate academic courses or programs), counseling and guidance, orientation, extracurricular activities, articulation and transfer services, and financial aid.[26] As this report indicates, some colleges offer more intensive services, including personal counseling and child care.

Within these different service areas, other divisions exist, including whether a student receives credit toward a degree or some other credential for coursework. Noncredit courses give colleges a degree of flexibility in initiating programs and offerings, but students in noncredit courses are not always eligible for financial aid and may not receive credit for relevant coursework if they return for a degree or certificate program in the future.[27] It is often difficult for students with low skills to move from noncredit remedial courses to credit-granting degree-track programs — a situation that sometimes creates two separate schools within the same college.[28]

Community College Students

Community colleges already serve large numbers of nontraditional students, including low-wage working parents. One study found that traditional students in 1992 made up only 13

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[23]Grubb, 2001a.
[24]Bailey and Averianova, 1998.
[25]Bailey and Averianova, 1998, pp. 28-29.
[26]Cohen and Brawer, 1996.
[27]Golonka and Matus-Grossman, 2001.
[28]Fitzgerald and Jenkins, 1997.

percent of the student body of public two-year colleges, compared with 37 percent of public and 46 percent of private four-year, non-doctorate-granting colleges.[29] Compared with first-time students attending public or private four-year colleges, first-time entering students who enroll in community college are much less likely to be dependents of their parents and much more likely to have low income and be enrolled part time.[30] They are also slightly more likely to be female.[31] In terms of race/ethnicity, white students are the majority at all institutions of higher learning, but in 1997 a slightly larger percentage of the total enrollment were of a minority race or ethnicity at community colleges (30 percent) than at four-year colleges (24 percent).[32]

Most community college students are combining school with work: Among full-time students, 45 percent reported working part time, and 30 percent reported working full time.[33] Community colleges tend to attract older students than four-year colleges: 26 percent of first-time entering students in community colleges were age 24 or older in 1995, compared with 6 percent or less in four-year institutions.[34] Because colleges do not normally track low-wage workers as a discrete group, exact percentages are not available; but the college administrators who were interviewed through the Opening Doors study affirmed that working, low-income students make up the large majority of their colleges' enrollments.

Attrition and Completion Rates

Completing their program is a challenge for all community college students, not just low-wage workers. One study in 1993 found that less than half of students who were enrolled in public two-year colleges completed a degree within three years of starting.[35] It should be noted, however, that some students leave for positive reasons, including transfer to a four-year college before attaining a certificate or degree, "experimenting" to find a career path, and building skills

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[29]Horn and Carroll, 1996, p. i. Nontraditional students were defined as those having one or more of the following characteristics (many of which overlap with the characteristics of low-wage workers): delayed enrollment in college after high school, part-time student status, financial independence, full-time work while enrolled, dependents other than a spouse, being a single parent, or lacking a standard high-school diploma. Traditional students did not meet any of these criteria.

[30]Coley, 2000; based on data from the National Center for Education Statistics. Recent national statistics also show that 63 percent of community college students attend part time, compared with only 22 percent of students enrolled in four-year colleges (Phillippe and Patton, 2000).

[31]While women outnumber men across postsecondary undergraduate institutions, 58 percent of two-year college students are women, compared, for example, with 55 percent of four-year college students in 1995-1996 (Horn, Berktold, and Malizio, 1998).

[32]Phillippe and Patton, 2000.

[33]Likewise, among part-time community college students, 32 percent reported working part time, and more than half reported working full time (Phillippe and Patton, 2000).

[34]Coley, 2000; based on data from the National Center for Education Statistics.

[35]Tinto, 1993.

for job advancement.[36] Literature on community college access and retention for other groups of students shed some light on why low-wage workers may have a more difficult time entering or completing college than traditional students. For example, one study of traditionally aged college students with low socioeconomic status (SES) reviewed existing research to show that the lowest SES quartile of high school graduates were much less likely than the highest SES quartile to enroll in any postsecondary education program.[37] Additional research indicates that the lowest SES college students are also more likely to enroll at less-than-four-year colleges (including community colleges) and more likely to never complete a four-year degree program.[38] Another study found that nontraditional students were much less likely to reach their four- or two-year degree goals than traditional students; in addition, the greater number of nontraditional characteristics that students possessed, the lower their completion rates.[39]

Purposes of the Opening Doors Study

The Opening Doors to Earning Credentials study seeks to understand access and retention issues relating to low-wage working community college students and to suggest potential solutions for policymakers and practitioners to consider. More specifically, the study tries to answer a series of related questions regarding how community colleges recruit and retain low-wage working students. These questions include:

1. How much do low-wage workers know about the opportunities afforded by postsecondary programs?
2. Why don't low-wage workers apply for postsecondary programs, and, if they do apply, why are their completion rates so low?
3. What factors account for the success of low-wage working students who are succeeding in college?
4. What can colleges and employers do to make training, certificate, and degree programs more accessible to low-wage workers?

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[36]Grubb, 1999a.

[37]Among the 1980 high-school graduates, 48 percent of the lowest SES group never enrolled over the course of one study, compared with 11 percent of the highest SES group (Carroll, 1989; cited in Terenzini, Cabrera, and Bernal, 2001).

[38]Terenzini, Cabrera, and Bernal, 2001.

[39]Only 27 percent of nontraditional students who started college in 1989 earned an associate's degree by 1994, compared with 53 percent of traditional students. Statistics for students seeking a bachelor's degree were not much better, with only 31 percent of nontraditional students having earned their degree by 1994, compared with 54 percent of traditional students (Horn and Carroll, 1996, p. 29).

5. What can colleges and their public system partners do to provide the academic and personal supports that low-wage working students need in order to attain higher completion rates?

6. What state and local policy changes could increase the enrollment and completion rates of low-wage working students?[40]

The Opening Doors study is unique in presenting the perspective of low-wage workers, but the study's lessons have a much broader relevance. Some of the approaches to increase low-wage working students' persistence in college described throughout the report would likely work for many other nontraditional students, including teenage parents, adults without children, and the unemployed. Likewise, many of the improvements suggested for services and supports offered by colleges or their public and private partners apply to traditional students, as well. The study takes on added relevance given the recent economic downturn. Data for this phase of the Opening Doors study were collected in the context of a robust economy. However, as unemployment levels rise and low-wage workers become an increasingly vulnerable segment of the labor force, there will likely be an increase in the numbers of unemployed low-income students seeking postsecondary credentials.[41] While issues of employment retention may take precedence over those of career advancement in the coming months, the issues connected with college access and retention remain important.

Community College Sites in the Opening Doors Study

A total of six community colleges was selected for the study, based on their demonstrated commitment and capacity to make college offerings more accessible to low-wage working students.[42] It is important to note that these colleges were selected because they offer innovative programs and services to attract and support low-wage working students; they are not intended to be representative of community colleges in general.[43] Chapter 7 highlights some of the colleges' promising program strategies and partnerships. Even though these colleges are already committed to the low-wage working population, they are also interested in learning

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[40]For examples of state programs and policy changes that could increase community college access and retention for this population, see Golonka and Matus-Grossman (2001).

[41]According to Smith and Woodbury (2000), low-wage jobs are extremely vulnerable during periods of economic recession.

[42]Other criteria for inclusion in the study were geographic cross-section; diversity of student body; type of programming (some colleges offer targeted, short-term, customized training programs, while others serve disadvantaged students through mainstream degree programs with additional support services); and on-site support services.

[43]Thus, the views of the current and the former students in the study may be influenced by the unique array of programs and services available from these colleges.

how their program and services are working and how they could better serve their students. Boxes 1.1 through 1.6 at the end of this chapter provide profiles of the six colleges and illustrate their diversity.[44]

Overview of This Report

Chapter 2 details the study's methodology and describes demographic, economic, and educational characteristics of the focus group participants. Chapter 3 describes low-wage workers' community college experiences and their views about college; the chapter addresses some of the academic factors that account for low completion rates, the key role of faculty for students, and the role of personal motivation in enrollment or withdrawal decisions. Chapter 4 presents key community college-based supports and the relatively low levels of knowledge that focus group participants had about the availability of such supports. Chapter 5 details the personal and situational factors raised in focus group discussions that interact with low-wage workers' enrollment or withdrawal decisions. Chapter 6 focuses on external institutions and agencies that also play an important role in low-wage workers' lives, including their employers and key government agencies or programs (such as welfare and workforce development). Finally, Chapter 7 describes some program models and policy strategies relating to educational, financial aid, partnership, and student support services that may increase community college access and retention both for low-wage workers and for the broader population of current, former, and potential college students.

[44]More information about the colleges in the study can be found at the following Web sites: Cabrillo College, www.cabrillo.cc.ca.us; LaGuardia Community College, www.lagcc.cuny.edu; Macomb Community College, www.macomb.cc.mi.us/main.asp; Portland Community College, www.pcc.edu; Sinclair Community College, www.sinclair.edu; Valencia Community College: http://valencia.cc.fl.us/.

Box 1.1

Key Information About Cabrillo College

Cabrillo College is located in Aptos, CA. Its three campuses/centers serve a population of 255,602.[a]

Enrollment data

Student population[b]: 13,685
Full-time enrollment (%): 28
Part-time enrollment (%): 72
Program enrollment: credit students 13,552; noncredit students[c] 133
Minimum credit requirement for associate's degree (based on semester system): 60
Associate's degrees awarded annually[d]: 605

Student demographics

Average age: 32
Gender (%): male 40.5; female 58.9
Race/ethnicity[e,f] (%): white, non-Hispanic 68; Hispanic 20; Asian 4; African-American 1

School and student financial data

Total revenues[g] ($): 42.2 million
Tuition cost per credit hour ($): 11
Credit students receiving financial aid[h] (%): 34

College and Specific Program Highlights

Cabrillo's Fast Track to Work program offers support services, academic counseling, assistance with financial aid, and career development and life skills training to low-income students enrolled in the college's mainstream degree and certificate programs. All these services are offered in one convenient location on campus. For students receiving public assistance, the Fast Track office provides money for child care and work study jobs, and it hosts a county eligibility worker to address students' welfare-related issues.

SOURCES: Cabrillo College 1999-2000 Factbook and interviews with college administrators.

NOTES: [a]2000 Census Bureau population statistics.

[b]This represents students who were enrolled for the 1999-2000 academic year.

[c]"Noncredit" is defined as the number of enrollments in noncredit classes only and does not include credit students who were taking at least one noncredit course.

[d]Degrees include Associate in Arts, Associate in Science, and Associate in Applied Science.

[e]Percentages do not add to 100 because data do not include students who fall into other categories or whose race/ethnicity is unknown.

[f]These represent racial/ethnic categories as defined by Cabrillo College.

[g]This represents total revenues for the 1999-2000 academic year.

[h]This represents credit students who were receiving financial aid for the 1998-1999 academic year.

Box 1.2

Key Information About LaGuardia Community College

LaGuardia Community College is located in Long Island City, NY. Its single campus serves a general population of 2,229,379.[a]

Enrollment data

Credit student population[b]: 11,396
Noncredit student population[b,c]: 27,152
Full-time equivalent (FTE): 9,886
Full-time enrollment (%): 66
Part-time enrollment (%): 34
Minimum credit requirement for associate's degree (based on semester system): 60
Associate's degrees awarded annually[d]: 1,471

Student demographic data

Average age: 23
Gender (%): male 37; female 63
Race/ethnicity[e,f] (%): white, non-Hispanic 15; Hispanic 35; Asian 15; African-American 17

School and student financial data

Total revenues ($): 84.3 million
Tuition cost per credit hour ($): 30-45
Credit students receiving financial aid (%): 50

College and Specific Program Highlights

In order to improve retention rates, LaGuardia has been a leader in the development of learning communities. Entering students enroll in pairs or clusters of courses that are thematically linked by faculty who have created the courses together. Learning communities provide students with an enriched, interdisciplinary experience as well as a supportive and friendly environment. The college also offers the College Opportunity to Prepare for Employment (COPE) program for welfare recipients enrolled in associate's degree programs. Eligible students receive intensive support services (including counseling, tutoring, and job placement services) as well as participate in their own learning community. In addition, LaGuardia offers on-site child care, night programs, and cooperative education internships to support its largely low-wage working student body.

SOURCES: LaGuardia Community College 1999-2000 Institutional Profile figures based on credit student body and interviews with college administrators.

NOTES: [a]2000 Census Bureau population statistics.

[b]This represents students who were enrolled for the 1999-2000 academic year.

[c]"Noncredit" is defined as the number of enrollments in noncredit classes only and does not include credit students who were taking at least one noncredit course.

[d]This includes Associate in Arts, Associate in Science, and Associate in Applied Science degrees awarded for the 1998-1999 academic year.

[e]Percentages do not add to 100 because data do not include students who fall into other categories or whose race/ethnicity is unknown.

[f]These represent racial/ethnic categories as defined by LaGuardia Community College.

Box 1.3

Key Information About Macomb Community College

Macomb Community College is located in Clinton Township, MI. Its five campuses/centers serve a population of 788,149.[a]

Enrollment data

Student population: 20,970
Full-time equivalent (FTE): 10,574
Full-time enrollment percentage: 27
Part-time enrollment percentage: 73
Program enrollment[b]: credit students 21,416; noncredit students[c] 23,010
Minimum credit requirement for associate's degree (based on semester system): 62
Associate's degrees awarded annually[d]: 2,305

Student demographics

Average age: 26
Gender (%): male 48; female 52
Race/ethnicity[e] (%): minority 11.3

School and student financial data

Total revenues ($): 84.8 million
Tuition cost per credit hour ($): 55 (in-county)
Credit students receiving financial aid (%): 17

College and Specific Program Highlights

Macomb partnered with the local workforce development board to offer a short-term training program, the 16-week Machinist Training Institute, for credit. The program targets low-wage workers and other low-income populations. The college offers additional short-term training programs in areas such as information technology.

SOURCES: Macomb Community College Fall 2000 Institutional Research figures based on credit student body and interviews with college administrators.

NOTES: [a]2000 Census Bureau population statistics.

[b]This represents students who were enrolled for the 1998-1999 academic year.

[c]"Noncredit" is defined as the number of enrollments in noncredit classes only and does not include credit students who were taking at least one noncredit course.

[d]This includes Associate in Arts, Associate in Science, and Associate in Applied Science degrees awarded for the 1999-2000 academic year.

[e]This represents racial/ethnic categories as defined by Macomb Community College.

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Box 1.4

Key Information About Portland Community College

Portland Community College is located in Portland, OR. Its 10 campuses/centers serve a population of 1,572,771.[a]

Enrollment data

Student population: 96,869
Full-time enrollment (%): 26
Part-time enrollment (%): 74
Program enrollment[b]: credit students 45,608; noncredit students[c] 51,261
Minimum credit requirement for associate's degree (based on quarter system): 90
Associate's degrees awarded annually[d]: 1,116

Student demographics

Average age: 36
Gender (%): male 45; female 55
Race/ethnicity[e,f] (%): white, non-Hispanic 76; Hispanic 10; Asian 8; African-American 4

School and student financial data

Total revenues[g] ($): 184.9 million
Tuition cost per credit hour ($): 38 (in-state)
Credit students receiving financial aid (%): 13

College and Specific Program Highlights

Portland is a leading college in terms of retention efforts. The college schedules welfare-to-work programs on weekends for working families, invites the entire family with separate educational programming for parents and children, and offers a wide range of incentives. Portland recently created career pathway programs, which include employer partnerships and articulated future education opportunities at the college or other local higher education institutions. The college is also piloting a program that used Perkins vocational education funds to offer enhanced student services in professional technical programs.

SOURCES: Portland Community College 1999-2000 Factbook figures based on total enrollment and interviews with college administrators.

NOTES: [a]2000 Census Bureau population statistics.

[b]This represents students who were enrolled in the 1999-2000 academic year.

[c]"Noncredit" is defined as the number of enrollments in noncredit classes only and does not include credit students who were taking at least one noncredit course.

[d]Degrees include Associate in Arts, Associate in Science, and Associate in Applied Science.

[e]Percentages do not add to 100 because data do not include students who fall into other categories or whose race/ethnicity is unknown.

[f]These represent racial/ethnic categories as defined by Portland Community College.

[g]This represents revenues generated in the 1999-2000 academic year.

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Box 1.5

Key Information About Sinclair Community College

Sinclair Community College is located in Dayton, OH. Its single campus serves a population of 559,062.[a]

Enrollment data

Credit student population[b]: 21,348
Noncredit student population[b,c]: 18,000
Full-time enrollment (%): 30.3
Part-time enrollment (%): 69.7
Minimum credit requirement for associate's degree (based on quarter system): 90
Associate's degrees awarded annually[d]: 1,024

Student demographics

Average age: 31
Gender (%): male 41; female 59
Race/ethnicity[e] (%): white, non-Hispanic 79; Hispanic 2; Asian 2; African-American 17

School and student financial data

Total revenues[f] ($): 116 million
Tuition cost per credit hour[f] ($): 29 (in-county)
Credit students receiving financial aid (%): 41

College and Specific Program Highlights

Sinclair was the only community college selected as a "best practices" institution for the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning's study of "Adult Learning Focused Institutions."[h] The college offers many flexible scheduling options including modularized courses and short-term training programs for credit toward longer-term degree or certificate programs. Sinclair is also piloting a new initiative aimed at career advancement for low-wage workers: "Access to Better Jobs." The program provides short-term occupational training, financial assistance to cover tuition and books, support services, and employment assistance to unemployed or underemployed individuals with income up to 200 percent of the federal poverty level.

SOURCES: Sinclair Community College Fall 2000 interviews with institutional research and financial aid staff. Figures are based on the credit student body and interviews with college administrators.

NOTES: [a]2000 Census Bureau population statistics.

[b]This represents students who were enrolled in Fall 2000.

[c]"Noncredit" is defined as the number of enrollments in noncredit classes only and does not include credit students who were taking at least one noncredit course.

[d]This includes Associate in Arts, Associate in Science, and Associate in Applied Science degrees awarded for the 2000-2001 academic year.

[e]These represent racial/ethnic categories as defined by Sinclair Community College.

[f]This represents total revenues for the 2001 academic year.

[g]This was the cost of tuition during the Winter 2001 quarter. As of the Winter 2002 quarter, tuition was $32/credit hour; it will be raised again, to $34.45/credit hour, for the Fall 2002 quarter.

[h]Flint and Associates, 1999.

Box 1.6

Key Information About Valencia Community College

Valencia Community College is located in Orlando, FL, and serves a population of 896,344.[a]

Enrollment data

Credit student population[b]: 40,397
Noncredit student population[b,c]: 11,265
Full-time equivalent (FTE): 14,277
Full-time enrollment (%): 35.5
Part-time enrollment (%): 64.5
Minimum credit requirement for associate's degree (based on semester system): 60
Associate's degrees awarded annually[d]: 3,358

Student demographics

Average age: credit students 24; noncredit students 39
Gender (%): male 43; female 57
Race/ethnicity[f] (%): white, non-Hispanic 59; Hispanic 19; Asian 6; African-American 14

School and student financial data

Total revenues ($): 120.6 million
Tuition cost per credit hour ($): 52 (in-state)
Credit students receiving financial aid (%): 43

College and Specific Program Highlights

The college offers a special package of support services to students who are educationally and economically disadvantaged, and who are either first-generation college students or have a diagnosed physical or learning disability, through the Academics in Motion (AIM) program. Services include mentoring, advising, career exploration, peer support, tutoring, workshops, and cultural activities. Students at Valencia also have the option to take a semester-long "Student Success" course, and the college conducts targeted outreach with students beginning with their initial admissions inquiry, as part of the advising process.

SOURCES: Valencia 2000/2001 Web site Fast Facts figures based on credit student body and interviews with college administrators.

NOTES: [a]2000 Census Bureau population statistics.

[b]This represents students who were enrolled for the 2000-2001 academic year.

[c]"Noncredit" is defined as the number of enrollments in noncredit classes only and does not include credit students who were taking at least one noncredit course.

[d]This includes Associate in Arts, Associate in Science, and Associate in Applied Science degrees awarded for the 2000-2001 academic year.

[e]Percentages do not add to 100 because data do not include students who fall into other categories or whose race/ethnicity is unknown.

[f]These represent racial/ethnic categories as defined by Valencia Community College.

Chapter 2

Methodology of the Study and Characteristics of Focus Group Participants

This chapter reviews the methodology of the focus group component of the Opening Doors to Earning Credentials study. After describing focus group recruitment, administration, and data analysis, the chapter presents profiles of the participants' demographic, educational, and economic characteristics.

The Methodology of the Study

Recruiting Focus Group Participants

At each research site, focus groups were conducted with three groups of low-wage workers: (1) current students enrolled in community college, usually in credit-granting programs, who had completed at least 50 percent of their course of study; (2) former students who were no longer enrolled in community college credit-granting programs (who had discontinued their studies prior to program completion); and (3) potential students who were otherwise eligible for community college but who had never enrolled in postsecondary credit-granting programs.[1] For purposes of this study, "low-wage workers" were defined as parents age 21 or older who had at least one child age 18 or younger and who had worked for low wages within the six months prior to focus group participation.[2] It is important to note that although study partici-

[1]Current students included some who were enrolled for the most recent semester as well as several recent graduates. The study focused on students in credit-granting degree programs because there is much more evidence of an economic return on them, and perhaps on certificate programs, than there is on noncredit remedial or occupational programs. Former students generally included those who met the wage, employment, and parental status criteria at the time they last attended college, who stopped attending the college at least nine months prior to the focus group and never completed a degree or certificate program either before or after leaving the college. For potential students, other types of education and training — either from the college or from other institutions — were permissible, including noncredit vocational training, adult basic education, General Educational Development (GED) classes, welfare-to-work and job search programs, continuing education, and other noncredit courses.

[2]No distinction was made among full-time, part-time, and sporadic work; some participants were currently unemployed. In addition, exceptions were made to the six-month rule for one focus group that included seasonal workers, who had been unemployed for longer periods. Wage limits for the study were defined by earned hourly wages at or below a maximum wage that differed at each site (wage levels were established in cooperation with college and public agency staff at each site, to take into account the local economy and standard of living). The wage levels ranged across sites from $9 per hour at Sinclair Community College (Dayton, OH) to $15 per hour at Cabrillo College (Aptos, CA) and LaGuardia Commu-

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pants met the criteria for inclusion, they would not necessarily categorize themselves by such terminology as "low-wage worker," "former student," or "potential student." Many former students, for example, considered themselves to be current students who were taking time off from college.

In many ways, the three kinds of study participants can be viewed on a continuum rather than as distinct groups, since current students might later withdraw from college due to a change in employment, child care availability, or other personal factors; former students might decide to return to college; and potential students might enroll in college once their personal or employment situations have stabilized. Still, comparing across the three groups may provide insights about the differences and commonalities within the population of low-wage working parents.

The sample was not randomly selected. The research team worked with each of the college sites and, in most cases, with their public agency partners (such as workforce development boards, one-stop centers, and welfare agencies) to identify candidates for each of the three focus groups (current, former, and potential students). In most cases, the colleges generated the lists of current and former students, whereas public agency partners were relied upon to recruit candidates for the potential student group.[3]

Due to the difficulties of recruiting study participants, multiple methods were employed. The most common recruitment method was for the college or agency to send out a letter inviting recipients to contact MDRC via a toll-free number if interested in participating.[4] Callers were screened using the study's criteria, and many were screened out for not meeting one or more of them (such as wage level, employment, or parental status) or, in the case of former students, for having completed a degree since leaving the community college. Eligible participants were also sometimes screened out, for not being available when the focus group was scheduled to meet.[5]

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nity College (Long Island City, NY). Only the individual participant's wage level was considered — not the family's income — so in some cases, participants' spouses or partners might have earned higher wages than the study's criteria allowed.

[3]One exception was in Clinton Township, Michigan, where both Macomb Community College and the local Macomb–St. Clair Workforce Development Board used mailings to recruit former students.

[4]In most sites, it was necessary to send out 350 to 800 letters to get enough eligible participants for each group. If the initial mailing failed to generate enough responses or eligible callers, the research team worked with the sites to do follow-up mailings and, in some cases, sent out mailings to new potential recruits. In several sites, follow-up phone calls were also used to contact people who had received letters. In some cases, posters and flyers were left in community and college locations to recruit additional participants.

[5]It seems likely that additional factors made recruitment difficult. In many cases, colleges or public agencies may not have had the most recent contact information for potential participants. And although

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Focus Group Administration and Data Analysis

Focus groups were conducted from March through July 2001. The target size for focus groups was six to eight participants, although as many as ten were accepted to allow for cancellations and no-shows. Each focus group was led by members of the research team who were trained in conducting focus groups and familiar with the protocols. At each of the six community colleges, three focus groups were conducted (one at each site for current, former, and potential students), for a total of eighteen focus groups. Focus groups ranged in size from three to ten participants, with an average of seven participants.The groups for current and potential students tended to be slightly larger, on average, than those for former students. A total of 131 individuals participated in the focus groups.

Each focus group was administered using a semistructured protocol. Discussion topics explored how low-wage working parents balance work, family, and college; how the college, employers, government and community-based organizations, and family and friends support or impede that balancing act; the role of personal motivation in decisions to attend or not to attend college; past education experiences; designing an ideal recruitment and retention package for low-wage working parents; personal and career goals; and personal reasons for education decisions (to attend, leave, or decide not to go to college).[6] The questions about college experiences focused mainly on academic and personal support services rather than on instruction, pedagogy, or curricula. These areas are also important to understanding students' decisions to enroll in or complete college programs.[7] All but one focus group was conducted in English: The group for potential students at Cabrillo College was conducted in Spanish, and being fluent in Spanish was an additional screening criterion for that group. Each focus group session lasted from one and a half to two hours, and audiotapes were recorded and later transcribed to facilitate content analysis.

As an incentive to join a focus group, participants received $50 in cash or a local merchant's gift certificate. Each participant received an additional $5 to cover transportation costs, and refreshments were provided during the focus group session.

The unit of analysis for this study was each focus group. The data from the focus groups were coded into 34 topics, using QSR*NUDIST, computer software designed to aid users in qualitative analysis of nonnumerical and unstructured data. The coding structure was generous and allowed the coding of discussion items into multiple topics as appropriate.

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incentives to participate were offered, these may not have been compelling enough to motivate potential participants.

[6]The potential students were asked how they hypothetically would balance work, family, and college responsibilities, based on their experiences in balancing work and family without college.

[7]Grubb (1999a), for example, explores instructional and pedagogical issues in the community college. Also see Badway and Grubb (1997) for curricular approaches to integrating occupational and academic education.

Additional Data Sources[8]

Besides the focus group sessions, two additional data collection instruments were used in this study:

1. At the start of each focus group session, participants were asked to complete a short survey to collect data on their educational, demographic, and employment characteristics.

2. Focus group participants were asked to complete a follow-up telephone interview four to six weeks after the focus group session to collect individual data about such topics as economic well-being, which participants might not disclose in a focus group setting. The phone interviews were an hour in length, on average, and followed a structured protocol. Participants were offered a $25 gift certificate as an incentive to complete the phone interview. Appendix Table A.1 provides selected interview results and response rates for current and former students, which will be discussed throughout the report.[9]

Profiles of Study Participants

Table 2.1 presents selected demographic and economic characteristics of the 131 focus group participants, both for the full sample and for members of the three groups: current, former, and potential students. As the table indicates, the sample is predominately female.[10] The sample is also racially and ethnically diverse, overall, although there are racial/ethnic differences across the three groups.[11] When the focus groups were conducted, most of the sample were between ages 21 and 40, although some older participants were also included. Across all three groups, more than half the participants were responsible for a child who was of preschool age or younger (including ages 1 through 5).

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[8]Research team members also conducted interviews in each site with administrators of the community college and of local welfare and workforce development agencies. This report does not draw directly on those interviews, but it should be noted that administrators raised many of the same issues that were raised by focus group participants.

[9]The response rate for the potential students (59 percent) was too low to include their interview results in the report.

[10]While low-wage workers are more likely in general to be female than male, females are overrepresented in the sample, compared with the low-wage working population as a whole. This is likely explained by the study's limiting participation to parents and recruiting many participants who were former or current welfare recipients.

[11]Most notably, blacks are represented more heavily in the sample than in the college population as a whole.

Table 2.1

Selected Demographic and Economic Characteristics of Focus Group Participants, by Group

Characteristic	Current Students	Former Students	Potential Students	Full Sample
Demographic Characteristics				
Gender (%)				
Female	86.0	85.7	84.8	85.5
Male	14.0	14.3	15.2	14.5
Age (%)				
21-30	38.0	31.4	32.6	34.4
31-40	34.0	34.3	37.0	35.1
41-50	12.0	17.1	13.0	13.7
Over 50	0.0	8.6	2.2	3.1
Missing	16.0	8.6	15.2	13.7
Average age (years)	32.3	35.4	33.0	33.4
Race/ethnicity (%)				
White, non-Hispanic	44.0	37.1	23.9	35.1
Black, non-Hispanic	18.0	48.6	32.6	31.3
Hispanic	24.0	11.4	30.4	22.9
Other[a]	14.0	0.0	13.0	9.9
Family Status				
Marital status (%)				
Single, never married	46.0	40.0	52.2	46.6
Married	30.0	34.3	13.0	25.2
Divorced or separated	16.0	17.1	28.3	20.6
Not married, living with someone	6.0	0.0	6.5	4.6
Widowed	2.0	2.9	0.0	1.5
Missing	NA	5.7	NA	<5.0
Primary caretaker (%)	96.0	88.6	89.13	91.6
Number of children (%)				
1	56.0	20.0	26.1	35.9
2	28.0	37.1	34.8	32.8
3	12.0	20.0	17.4	16.0
4	4.0	5.7	8.7	6.1
5-8	0.0	8.6	10.9	6.1
Missing	NA	8.6	<5.0	<5.0
Average number of children	1.6	2.5	2.5	2.2
Age of youngest child (%)				
Under 1	2.0	6.3	2.2	3.1
1-5	58.0	46.9	56.5	53.4
6-12	32.0	34.4	30.4	31.3
13 and older	8.0	12.5	8.7	9.2
Missing	<5.0	8.6	<5.0	<5.0

(continued)

Table 2.1 (continued)

Characteristic	Current Students	Former Students	Potential Students	Full Sample
Educational Attainment				
Earned high school diploma or GED[b] (%)	98.0	94.3	50.0	80.2
Earned credits toward a post-high school degree (%)	90.0	88.6	NA	89.4
Enrolled in college at time of focus group (%)	92.0	5.7	NA	56.5
Missing (%)	6.0	5.7	NA	5.9
Completed half or more of program (%)	74.0	NA	NA	NA
Educational goal (%)				
Associate's degree	74.0	NA	NA	NA
Certificate	18.0	NA	NA	NA
Bachelor's degree	16.0	NA	NA	NA
Employment Status				
Currently employed (%)	92.0	58.7	68.6	74.1
Average number of hours worked per week[c]	26.0	37.5	35.2	32.2
Average number of months at job[c]	19.4	28.1	10.0	17.9
Employed in internship or work-study program[cd] (%)	22.0	2.9	NA	9.2
Missing[d] (%)	<5.0	5.7	NA	<5.0
Average weekly wage[c] ($)	246	407	281	299
Received Income from Financial Aid Sources in the Past Year[d] (%)				
Pell or other education grants	82.0	25.7	NA	38.2
Missing	<5.0	11.4	NA	<5.0
Education loans	40.0	2.9	NA	16.0
Missing	10.0	8.6	NA	6.1
Scholarships	16.0	0.0	NA	6.1
Missing	12.0	8.6	NA	6.9
Received Income from Nonwork, Nonfinancial Aid Sources in the Past Year[e] (%)				
TANF or other cash welfare	24.0	31.4	50.0	35.1
Missing	10.0	5.7	13.0	9.9
Food Stamps	38.0	40.0	78.3	52.7
Missing	8.0	8.6	<5.0	6.1
Child support	26.0	20.0	17.4	21.4
Missing	10.0	8.6	13.0	10.7
Sample size	50	35	46	131

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Table 2.1 (continued)

SOURCE: MDRC calculations using data from written surveys administered at the Opening Doors focus group meetings.

NOTES: Nonresponses for the items in which the nonresponse rate for all specific characteristics was 5 percent or higher across the three groups are shown as "missing." The nonresponses for all other items were excluded from the calculations.

For the group of potential students at Cabrillo College, the survey was administered in Spanish. These survey responses were translated from Spanish into English for the purposes of analysis.

[a]This category includes respondents who identified themselves as being Asian, Native American, or another racial/ethnic group.

[b]In the survey, particpants were asked first if they had a high school diploma and then if they had a GED. Since some participants responded "yes" to each question, the responses to both questions were combined.

[c]Participants who were unemployed at the time of the focus group meetings were asked to refer to their most recent job when answering these questions.

[d]Responses from potential students were excluded from these calculations because potential students are defined as individuals who have never enrolled in college.

[e]In addition to these sources of income, participants were asked to report if they received income from SSI, DSSI, unemployment insurance, worker's compensation, and other sources. These responses are not included in the analysis because these were not reported as large sources of income and because 8.6 percent to 23.9 percent of participants did not answer these questions.

Cross-Group Comparisons

Compared with the other two groups, the current students tended to be slightly younger than average; were more likely to be white, non-Hispanic; and reported having relatively smaller family sizes, on average. They were also more likely to report being currently employed but working fewer hours per week and earning lower wages, on average, than participants in the other two groups. Financial aid was a key source of nonwork income for the current students, and while they were less likely to report receiving cash assistance or Food Stamps than members of the other two groups, they were slightly more likely to report receiving child support.

On average, the former students were older than participants in the other two groups and were more likely to be black, non-Hispanic, and to report being single. Fewer of the former students reported being currently employed, but as a group they reported the most hours worked per week; earned the highest wages, on average; and had the greatest job stability (an average of more than two years with the same employer).[12] The former students were less likely to report receiving welfare or Food Stamps than the potential students, but they more likely to be doing so than the current students.

The potential students were more likely to be black, non-Hispanic, than the current students. They were also more likely to be Hispanic and divorced or separated than members of the other groups.[13] Like the former students, the potential students had larger family sizes, on average, than the current students. They had lower levels of education than the other groups; only half of the potential students reported having earned a high school diploma or GED. This suggests that, among the potential students, some were realistically closer to attending college than others.[14] While the potential students were more likely to report being currently employed than the former students, compared with both other groups, they reported much less job stability, were much more likely to be receiving TANF or Food Stamps, and were less likely to be receiving child support.

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[12]Participants who were not currently working answered questions about their most recent job's hours, wages, and stability. The former students may have been earning higher wages partly because they were working longer hours and partly because of the screening criteria; the former students had to have been earning low wages when they were last enrolled in college but could be earning higher wages when they participated in the study.

[13]As noted earlier, the potential student focus group at Cabrillo College was conducted entirely in Spanish, and fluency in Spanish was an additional criterion for participation.

[14]Some community colleges require students in credit-granting classes to have a high school credential, which was likely an access barrier for many of the potential students.

Conclusion

The cross-group comparisons above suggest that the current and the former students were experiencing greater job stability and relying less on forms of public assistance than the potential students. Compared with the current students, the other two groups were relatively more likely to report characteristics that could be barriers to combining work and college, such as having responsibility for one more child, on average, and working more hours per week. Subsequent chapters examine other important differences and similarities across the three types of groups.

Chapter 3

Participants' Educational Experiences, Views, and Personal Motivation

This chapter describes the community college experiences of low-wage working students and the plans of potential students for postsecondary education in the future. For the current and formers students, especially, the focus groups explored their experiences in balancing the demands of work, family, and school. Wherever possible, the chapter includes potential students' expectations about college and their experiences with noncredit remedial programs. The chapter also explores participants' beliefs and views about education and the role of personal motivation in their decisions to attend or not attend college.

Major Themes

- Most of the current and former students in the focus groups described being enrolled in occupational programs of study, and some described taking a long time to complete their programs, because they were attending part time or taking time off from college. Many participants expressed education goals that were beyond their current level of attainment; many of the current and former students reported plans to attend four-year colleges or universities.

- Community college faculty members were described as being either a key support or a barrier for students. Some perceived faculty as not understanding that working students and parents have many conflicting responsibilities outside of college.

- Those current and former students who experienced academic difficulties attributed them largely to having trouble with specific subjects or to absences from classes due to personal matters. Focus group participants also reported mixed experiences with remedial education and developmental programs, and some participants (especially the potential students) talked about needing help with basic skills.

- Participants' general attitudes about the value of education did not seem to play a major role in their decisions to attend college. Most participants considered education to be a valuable means to career advancement and wage progression, and working student parents saw themselves as a role model for

their children. The current students placed the greatest value on attending college, and the potential students valued it least.

- Personal motivation played an important role in making choices among work, family, and college responsibilities.

Programs and Goals

Most of the current and former students in the focus groups described being enrolled in occupational education or training programs with the goal of attaining either an associate's degree (with the potential to transfer to a four-year college or university) or an occupational certificate.[1] Another common theme among participants was having switched programs over the course of their study, for a variety of reasons, including poor academic performance in courses required for their original major, a change in career interests, or finding out that employment opportunities and salaries were better in a different field. Many students talked about taking much longer to graduate than the assumed one year of full-time study for a certificate and two years for an associate's degree.[2] Some students discussed taking more than two years and even more than five years to complete their program. In general, meeting all the prerequisites and general education requirements of a program takes a long time.[3]

Some participants described going to college fairly consistently over a long period, while others described having to "stop out" (take time off) or drop out for a while. Many former students described themselves as taking time off from college rather than as having dropped out.

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[1]Examples of these programs included business or office administration; medical/health fields; computer programming/information technology; early childhood and secondary education; accounting; engineering; automotive training; and public service. Some potential students described having an interest in occupational training in similar subjects or having past experience with noncredit occupational programs.

[2]The participants' experiences appear to be similar to the national norm for community college students in general. A recent report (Bosworth and Choitz, 2002) cites Census Bureau statistics showing that the average community college student takes more than four years to complete an associate's degree (Bauman and Ryan, 1996).

[3]Results of the follow-up phone interviews with participants further illustrate that participants have been working toward their postsecondary objectives for longer than expected. Appendix Table A.1 illustrates that while nearly 60 (58.5) percent of current student respondents had first attended their community college within the past two to five years, 31.7 percent percent had attended for the first time more than five years previously. Likewise, while 57.1 percent of former students reported first attending their community college within the past two to five years, 42.9 percent reported attending for the first time more than five years previously.

Some current students talked about needing to take time off in the near future, and others had attended college right after high school, dropped out, and then returned as adults, many years later.[4]

The current and former students often discussed immediate or future plans to transfer to other educational institutions after attending community college. Among the current students, many talked about specific universities or degrees they were planning to pursue. Phone interview results indicate that most of the current and former students planned to pursue additional education beyond their highest completed grade level in the future (see Appendix Table A.1).

Participants' Views of Faculty

Interaction with community college faculty is an important aspect of students' experiences.[5] Whether instructional faculty are helpful or lack understanding, they provide the point of most frequent contact for students, and they make key decisions about course loads and requirements, attendance policies, and final grades.

Lending a Helping Hand

The current and former students described how individual faculty members were understanding or supportive of students' other responsibilities as parents and/or working adults and even directly intervened when students were experiencing a personal or financial crisis. Participants gave examples of how particular instructors were willing to work with them outside of class time. For example:

> Sometimes teachers say, "I'll help you out because I know you got a job and I know you got kids and I know you [have] to go to work. I'll work with you. Call me. We'll do this on the phone."

Other participants gave examples of supportive faculty who were lenient about missed assignments or exams, who let students bring their children to class when child care arrangements fell through, or who made arrangements for students to miss particular classes that conflicted with their work schedules.

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[4]Results from the phone interviews (Appendix Table A.1) show that more than a third of the current student respondents reported having taken breaks in their college attendance (besides summers off) and that slightly more than half of the former students reported going to college continuously, before they most recently took time off or dropped out of college.

[5]Recent research on community college immigrant students and students of color found that students identified teachers as being among the most influential factors of their college experience (California Tomorrow, 2002).

Participants also talked about specific instances when faculty members took an interest in their personal lives and helped them with a crisis or ongoing problem, outside of class. One student offered this example:

> We were going through . . . a little tragedy. We were homeless and stuff. My teachers were very supportive. They made sure we had food, clothing, a place to stay. They were my backup after I had explained what had happened because I had to drop out during the semester and they were there backing me up to make sure that I didn't fall behind and when I did have to drop, they were there the next semester to support me.

Participants also talked about incidents where teachers lent them money or made home visits when they were out of school for an extended period. For some former students, supportive teachers were an asset, but teachers' efforts alone did not keep students from dropping or stopping out of college. One former student explained that although his professor was "real nice, called me at home," and "knew what I was going through," in the end he still dropped out, saying that "she did try to help me but there wasn't much she could do."

Lack of Understanding

Conversely, other focus group participants described specific instructors who were not sensitive to working students' responsibilities outside college or who even treated them negatively compared with younger students. One older student described her belief that some instructors gave preference to younger college students:

> I think the professors at the college aren't helpful to older students. They just think you are here because . . . you are here for fun. . . . They think you are here just to take a class because you have nothing better to do all day. You are not here as a student. You are here taking an enrichment program. That's what they make you feel like, and they really show it to you. I have noticed. I have one teacher right now that's bad. In fact, I am taking the whole class over, because he's so bad.

Some of the working students and parents felt that teachers did not give them a chance to make up missed classes or assignments when they fell behind due to personal circumstances. A common theme involved teachers who did not allow students to make up missed exams or classes when, for example, they had been hospitalized or were caring for a sick child or other family member. In general, some participants described situations where they felt that their instructors had too much discretion in penalizing students for absences or missed exams — which they believed they should be allowed to make up when they were out of class for legitimate reasons.

At some of the colleges in the study, the level of support and understanding that faculty provided seemed to vary depending on whether students were enrolled in night or day courses. Several current students described night teachers as being more accustomed to working with older students and parents. One student explained:

> Night school seems to work real well. There, teachers understand people have other things going on in their lives — parents, work, whatever the situation may be.

Instructors' Discretion

Types of Assignments

Some of the current students criticized computer-based assignments as being a burden, especially for students who did not own a computer and did not have much time to spend at the college outside of class. They talked about needing to spend an extra three hours or more per day at the college, to do their assignments in the computer lab. Likewise, some students discussed the complications of working on group projects or in required study groups, given the demands of their personal lives. Assignments that required them to visit sites or attend events off campus were difficult, given their schedules and the problems of arranging child care. One student liked having the option of taking a course on-line so that she could virtually visit off-campus sites, without having to attend field trips.

Homework

Some participants felt that individual faculty members assigned too much homework compared with other instructors. One student who believed this about his instructor said that he wished faculty were more responsive to working students' complaints about the amount of homework required, explaining:

> Sometimes they seem to forget that we're the ones coming to pay them. They seem to forget that and suddenly they demand all this stuff [too much homework] out of you. And I finally turned to one of my instructors and said, "Wait a minute — I'm paying your paycheck. I'm paying to come to your class and get this abuse."

Participants' Views of Academic Performance

The current and former students talked often about their academic performance, as measured by course or program completion and grade-point average. Their positive and negative experiences influenced their decisions about continuing in college.

Top of the Class

For many students, performing well academically (earning As and Bs) was an important goal. A current student said that keeping up her grades was a priority even though she knew that she would have to leave college several times over the course of her education. She said, "Even when I would drop out I would always have a good GPA and I always would push myself and then if I needed to drop [out] I would make sure that I covered all the bases so that when I came back, I still had the high GPA." Some former students also talked about having had good grades but needing to take time off from college for reasons other than academic performance. For some participants, especially current students, doing well in college was a change from their academic performance in the past, in high school or previous attempts at college, while other students reported consistently doing well in high school and college.

Not Making the Grade

Another common theme among the current and former students centered on academic difficulties in college, such as experiencing a drop in performance and getting bad grades.

Specific Subjects

Some students discussed academic difficulty with particular subjects — such as mathematics, writing, or English — or more generally of having failed or needing to repeat particular courses. One former student described how repeatedly failing an English course led to his dropping out of college, since he received time-limited government funding and could not complete his program within the five-term period that was specified. He explained that although he was doing well in his other courses, having to keep repeating that one course put him "too far behind."

Absence Due to Personal Crisis

Some students attributed a drop in academic performance or failing a course to missing critical class time or tests due to a personal crisis. One student described how family illness had led to her failing a mathematics course:

> One time my kid was sick with the flu. And then I got the flu. And that was two weeks out of my math class. Well, all of a sudden, I'd wiped out of math. There was no way I could make it up. There was no leeway.

Another student felt that it was unfair to lose an entire semester's work for missing several classes, explaining that if "you miss three classes — you shouldn't lose your ten weeks that you were there."[6]

Remedial/Developmental Experiences and Needs

For participants with deficits in basic skills or who lacked a high school credential — especially among the potential student groups — remedial or developmental education programs played an important role in shaping their postsecondary experiences or decisions about attending college.[7] In the phone interviews (Appendix Table A.1), many current and former student respondents indicated that they had needed help with math, reading, or writing while in college. Likewise, many former students indicated that they would need help in those areas if they decided to return to college in the future.

Participants talked about remedial or developmental education offered by a variety of institutions, including adult schools, community-based organizations, government (welfare and workforce development) agencies, and the community colleges themselves; often, they described having remedial needs without mentioning specific programs.[8] Several older former and potential students described the need to review basic skills when adults attend college after a long absence from education. Taking additional "refresher" courses often means that older students need to take more courses than would normally be required, and thus they take longer to finish their programs. One student explained that when she entered college, "after not having been in school for a while," she "had to start out kind of at the bottom level of everything."

A related issue is the need to finish remedial or development courses — along with the academic or occupational program — in the time allowed by financial aid guidelines. One former student described taking six courses instead of three or four in order to qualify as a full-time student so that she could receive financial aid and still take the remedial coursework she needed.

Some participants benefited from having to take developmental courses before entering their occupational or academic program. One current student who had previously dropped out of a four-year college explained that the developmental program at the community college helped her to improve her basic skills and gave her the confidence to return to college.

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[6]For a related discussion of academic probation, see the section in Chapter 4 about financial aid and eligibility issues.

[7]One national study found that, on average, 36 percent of beginning community college students in 1998 were taking one or more remedial courses (Shults, 2000).

[8]Current or former students who had remedial education experiences represent a group of students who were able to enter credit-granting academic or occupational courses. Except for a subset of the potential students who had taken remedial courses from the college or another provider, researchers were unable to talk with current remedial students who had not yet made the transition to the credit-granting side.

College Entry Requirements and Program Prerequisites

Especially for potential students in the focus groups, not having a high school diploma or General Educational Development (GED) certificate was a barrier to entering college. One potential student explained that an occupational training program would not accept her without a GED certificate, even though she had gone through similar training in another state in the past, without having a GED. Similarly, participants talked about prerequisites needed to enroll in college programs. One current student described needing to repeat the same course three times before she could advance to other required courses in her occupational program. Several potential students described negative experiences in trying to enroll in occupational courses or certificate programs and being told that they didn't meet the basic skills requirements. They felt that deficits in basic skills shouldn't prevent them from getting occupational training for specific job skills — and many of them had already attended adult basic education courses and passed the exit exam or earned a GED.

Several participants expressed frustration about being placed at the wrong level of a course — either too advanced or too easy — in college or in a remedial program. A former student described her boredom with a basic skills course that she took in order to meet a work requirement for welfare:

> So, they do send you to this program to write, read, improve math skills, [learn] how to do interviews. So, I already know all that, so I'm . . . just sitting there. And the teachers . . . you're falling asleep and . . . I already know this.

Finally, participants in several of the focus groups talked about deficits in English language skills as being another barrier to attending college. (This came up in groups other than the one potential student group that was conducted entirely in Spanish.) A current student talked about how difficult it is to take courses in English when her native language is Spanish; during her first semester, she almost "burned out" taking program courses while also taking beginning courses in English as a Second Language:

> My first semester here with . . . the first-level English community college [course]. I was taking Accounting with an African-American professor who doesn't speak any Spanish, just English, and so fast, and I was, "Oh my God, I'm going to quit because I was just . . . thinking I'm going to go crazy here, Accounting, English. I don't understand anything, it's terrible."

One of the potential students described how poor English proficiency, along with low levels of literacy in her native language, made it extremely difficult for her to find employment, much less attend college.

Participants' Views and Attitudes About College

The overwhelming majority of focus group participants described education as valuable, in the abstract, and had a positive attitude toward the idea of attending college, although some of the potential students did not share these views. The participants' generally positive attitudes were moderated by personal motivation and other personal factors explored in later chapters.

Reasons for Viewing Education as Valuable

A major reason why many participants described education as valuable centers on the financial and employment opportunities that college makes available.[9] One current student explained: "I think education is the only way to do better in life . . . like without enough money, if you want to be better and do something . . . be something in life — education is the only way I've found." A related idea is that the current labor market places a premium on postsecondary education and credentials — much more so than in the past, when a high school diploma would suffice. One current student explained that a college education and credential can also provide protection when the labor market or economy experiences a downturn:

> I look at a college education as a parachute. I mean you get a job — obviously, there's a changing world out there. You know, just because you get yourself a job, you're not guaranteed that that business is going to be open forever. But at least with a college degree, if that job ever closes down, you still have that backing with you that will — yes, you will free-fall but you're not going to fall flat on the ground because you didn't have that paper.

Another prevalent theme in the focus groups was that education, particularly college, is important for children, even if it is not a priority for their parents, and that going to college is a way to be a good role model as a parent. Participants talked about being an "example" for their kids by going to college and about how they want more for their children than they themselves had access to, including education. One potential student explained that while she hasn't earned a GED or gone to college, her children are going to complete a high school and a postsecondary education. She said: "They're going to finish high school even if I have to sit next to them in

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[9]This finding is generally similar to what Bosworth and Choitz (2002) reported, based on data from the National Household Education Survey (NHES) of adult learners; those who are enrolled in education programs are participating for "work-related reasons," in order to gain skills for their current job or prepare for future employment opportunities (p. 23). Likewise, Bosworth and Choitz also reviewed a body of research based on the NHES that found that many adults who are not currently enrolled in education programs express an interest in pursuing additional education but do not, for many of the same reasons presented in this report in Chapter 5, including insufficient time, competing family responsibilities, the cost of attending college, and scheduling conflicts (p. 25).

high school and they're going to college even if I have to work three jobs. . . . I don't want them to go [through] what I have to go through. I want better for my kids."

Some participants talked about the value of education in terms of self-esteem or self-worth; statements to that effect were made in three of the current student groups, four of the former student groups, and one of the potential student groups. Several participants talked about education as being a way to empower themselves after ending an abusive relationship. Others talked about education as being an important goal to accomplish for personal fulfillment, as an adult. As one current student put it, "People can take a lot of stuff away from me but they can't take education away." Several participants also talked about education as a means to improve their reputation.

"A Piece of Paper" Versus Job Skills

In some of the focus groups, the researchers tried to gauge more specifically which aspect of a college education the participants believed is more valuable: the skills learned through job-related courses or the college credential itself (either a certificate or an associate's degree). Both views had proponents, but there appeared to be a stronger belief that the college credential, or the "piece of paper," is more valuable than the discrete skills learned. One former student explained:

> The knowledge is nice, the experience is nice, but the piece of paper is what's going to buy you your house because it's going to get you your job that's going to be more money. So, the piece of paper would always win because that's the one you could walk in and go, "I have this," and they go, "Well, we have to pay you this."

Some participants supported the opposing view — that it is the skills learned in college and not the credential itself that has value — but most did not elaborate as to why they believed this. One current student explained that it was tempting to consider dropping out of his program, since jobs were available for someone with his skills even without a college credential; and a former student said that she had been able to get good jobs with the few courses she had taken, without a college degree.

Reasons for Considering Education as a Low Priority or Not Important

A small group of participants, mostly potential students, expressed the idea that a college education is not valuable or is not a priority for them. Potential students from one group talked about college as wasting their time, since there were no guaranteed jobs linked with program completion. A few current and potential student participants expressed a related belief, that on-the-job experience is more important in the labor market than a college education or

credential. Two students explained that, in their industries (nursing and hospitality), job experience carries more weight with employers than college does. Some potential students discussed the idea that education, particularly college, is not for everyone, including themselves and their children. One potential student explained that people can teach themselves through community resources, like the library, and through reading: "Well, when you think about it, . . . why really go to school? You can go to the library and get any information you need."

Past Educational Experiences

Participants were asked about their past experiences with high school or other education and training programs outside of community college.[10] No single experience was typical to any of the three types of groups or was true across them.[11] Some participants loved high school, while others loathed it. There did not appear to be much of a link between how participants felt about high school and whether or not they dropped out.

The Role of Personal Motivation

Participants often acknowledged that their own motivation was a major factor in the education decisions that they had made over their lives. One former student explained:

> I want to be honest and say that probably the biggest factor that has stopped me from continuing to go to school is me. I haven't made it a high enough priority or I have done things in my life that have stopped me from being able to go.

Participants also commented on their personal priorities, expressing whether full-time work or school was more important at this point in their lives. Among current students, school trumped work. As one current student put it: "School's first. Yeah, for me, definitely school is more important than any job. I am going to stay in school." Former and potential students felt differently, however, as expressed in this comment by a former student: "My family is first, then my employment, then, you know, college."

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[10]As noted in Chapter 2, the potential students had the lowest rate of high school completion.

[11]Many participants across the three types of groups talked about leaving high school without graduating and, in some cases, later studying with other education or training providers to earn a GED. A smaller group of participants talked about entering college after high school but leaving college without graduating, on their first attempt. Other high school graduates or GED recipients delayed college to work to join the military, or to pursue education and training through a proprietary or trade school or a job training program.

Conclusion

The focus group participants were most appreciative of programs and faculty that took their multiple responsibilities into account and gave them flexibility in balancing the demands of work, school, and family. Completing a credential program could take a long time for some participants, and many did not attend continuously. Academic performance was an issue for some participants and could also have ramifications on financial aid. Participants reported mixed experiences with remedial or developmental education programs, and some — especially the potential students — indicated the need to review or upgrade basic skills.

Some participants' views on faculty or course requirements and academic performance suggest a gulf between their own expectations and those of their colleges regarding academic responsibilities and the overall educational experience. Indeed, colleges are faced with a difficult balancing act of their own as they try to uphold academic standards while accommodating students' outside responsibilities and real needs for support. Chapter 7 explores outreach and ways to improve students' access to information, but these participants' experiences do suggest that colleges need to more clearly articulate what they expect (in terms of attendance and homework assignments, for example) and the resources available to help students fulfill their obligations (such as tutoring, remediation, and counseling or other services). Many students — particularly first-generation college students — have no personal or family experiences on which to draw.

In general, most focus group participants believe college to be a valuable investment, especially for their children. Although some of the potential and former students expressed little interest in going to college themselves, negative attitudes about education do not seem to lie behind their decision not to enroll. Rather, individual circumstances, limited access to information, personal motivation and priorities, and other factors discussed in this and later chapters appear to play a much more critical role in shaping decisions to pursue postsecondary education.

Chapter 4

Key Community College Supports

This chapter explores the focus group participants' experiences with and awareness of key supports and services available through their community colleges (with the exception of child care, which is discussed in Chapter 5), including financial aid, counseling, advising, and special programs targeted at specific kinds of students.[1]

Major Themes

- Participants highlighted financial aid, counseling (including guidance counseling, personal counseling, and academic advising), and packages of services and supports offered through special programs as being critical in making it possible for them to enter and complete a college program.
- Some participants described being ineligible for financial aid for such reasons as having too much income, attending college less than half time, defaulting on past loans or grants, and performing poorly academically or being on probation.
- One barrier to using college-based services and supports was that participants did not know that the services exist or had limited information about them.

The focus group discussions did not examine in depth the conventional "student services" that are offered to all students, such as registration and admissions, but instead explored services that might be useful to working students and parents, such as child care, counseling (academic and personal), and special programs targeted at low-wage workers and other, overlapping groups of students.[2] In general, participants across all three types of focus groups (current, former, and potential students) believed that a variety of services are available on campus. There was some discussion of the hours that college-based services are available and whether these hours are convenient for working students and parents. Some participants felt that service hours should be expanded to include weekends and holidays or at least should coincide with all

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[1]In most cases, the potential students in the focus groups hypothesized about the services that they might require if they were to attend college, although some had actual experiences with admissions or financial aid services.

[2]With regard to registration, several students said that it was problematic to register for required classes before the classes were closed out, especially for students who were working during registration hours.

class hours (including evenings and weekends). A former student who usually took day classes was surprised by what she found when she visited the campus one evening:

> I was going during the day, and I was shocked when I took a night class. It's like the whole college is closed down. . . . They can't go to the cafeteria. The bookstore is not open. None of that is available to people who take the night classes.

Table 4.1 illustrates how frequently the following topics were discussed in each of the three types of focus groups.

Financial Aid

Chapter 5 details that concerns about income and the cost of attending college (including the opportunity cost of losing income by reducing work hours) were a major theme across all three types of focus groups. Even though financial aid plays a critical role in allowing low-wage workers to access and complete postsecondary education, many low-wage working students do not receive financial aid, or they receive insufficient assistance.[3] Participants discussed a range of financial aid options, and overall they preferred Pell Grants, work-study grants, and other forms of scholarships to student loans, because loans require repayment at some future date. A single source of financial aid was rarely sufficient for this study's participants, who usually combined several types of aid.

Financial Aid: Can't Attend College Without It

Focus group participants described financial aid explicitly as a critical support that enabled (or would enable) them to balance school, work, family, and other responsibilities. Besides tuition, other expenses (such as the cost of books, which are not always covered by formal financial aid or employers' tuition reimbursement programs) were a source of concern for several of the current and former students. For some participants, federal financial aid (student loans and/or Pell Grant funds) not only covered tuition and other expenses but also provided

[3]A recent report on financial aid for working students found that, nationally, only 7.7 percent of full-time workers who attend postsecondary programs less than half time and are similar to this study's participants (they have dependents and earn less than 200 percent of the federal poverty level) receive any financial aid from federal, state, or institutional sources (Bosworth and Choitz, 2002; based on analysis of the U.S. Department of Education's National Postsecondary Student Aid Survey). Further, community colleges receive a disproportionately lower share of federal Pell Grants than other postsecondary institutions, partly because community colleges offer cheaper (although consistently rising) tuitions than private or public four-year colleges and partly because of restrictions on receiving aid for noncredit students and those attending less than half time (Cohen and Brawer, 1996).

Table 4.1

Frequency of Discussions Related to Key Community College Supports

Heavily Discussed	Moderately Discussed	Infrequently Discussed
Current Students		
• General need for financial assistance (no mention of financial aid programs) • Financial aid as critical support • Need for direction • Counseling as critical support • Using special programs or services at the college	• Work-study programs • Wariness about student loans • Burden of financial aid process/researching opportunities	• Cash-flow problems with financial aid process
Former Students		
• General need for financial assistance (no mention of financial aid programs) • Financial aid as critical support • Need for direction	• Work-study programs • Counseling as critical support • Using special programs or services at the college	• Cash-flow problems with financial aid process • Burden of financial aid process/researching opportunities
Potential Students		
• General need for financial assistance (no mention of financial aid programs) • Need for direction	• Wariness about student loans	• Financial aid as critical support

SOURCE: Data from participant discussions at the Opening Doors focus group meetings.

NOTES: Topics raised in only one or two focus groups were categorized as "infrequently discussed"; in three or four focus groups as "moderately discussed"; and in five or six focus groups as "heavily discussed."

The analysis presented was conducted within each type of group (current, former, or potential students), across the six focus group sessions conducted for each type.

additional income, which allowed them to reduce their work hours and concentrate on college. One student explained:

> That's the hardest — the financial burden for the last six years has been the most difficult. I was going to school full time because the county was assisting my son and I, and then that ended, so I had to go to school part time and work part time. When the student loans come in, I can actually not work and feel somewhat comfortable, but they only last so long, and then I am panicked for work again.

Several students reported that work study was helpful because it provided additional income and flexible part-time employment. Several former students noted that work-study income was not sufficient to cover living expenses and that they had to take on additional part-time employment or struggled to make ends meet. For example, a former student described trying to support her family on work-study funds:

> Well, I worked here during the school year so I could be a work-study [student]. And I didn't have a car, and I was making $4.50 per hour. And even raising two kids, $200 isn't really that much. Well, I had to figure out a way to get here . . . because if you don't have enough money . . . you're going to have to buy books . . . everything. So, everything is on me and child support.

Covering general living expenses while attending college was a source of concern among many participants, especially the potential students. One potential student worried that financial aid would not be enough to cover living expenses, especially if she had to reduce work hours to take on part-time college:

> If I had a program to go to, I would need . . . extra cash. . . . I wouldn't be able to work because I'd be missing out on the kids. And that's time with the kids. So I would need some extra cash that would be coming in for me going to school.

Ineligibility for Financial Aid

Most of the current and some former students in the focus groups reported having received Pell Grants or other grants in the past year. Among the current students, many reported having received student loans, and a smaller percentage reported receiving work-study grants or

scholarships (Table 2.1).[4] Both the current and the former students talked about not being eligible for federal financial aid for a variety of reasons, discussed below.[5]

Too Much Income

One common theme centered on participants' believing or having been told that they were not eligible for financial assistance, usually the Pell Grant, because their income was too high.[6] This was especially an issue for two-parent families. Several married students explained that earning two incomes made each spouse ineligible. One student expressed her belief that the current income eligibility guidelines are simply too low for working families. Several participants felt that the income eligibility problem also resulted in part because federal financial aid calculations are based only on income rather than also on expenses.[7] One student felt it was unfair that financial aid calculations do not take into account "what's coming out," only "what you work coming in." Likewise, a potential student who was declared ineligible for financial aid because of his income said, "They don't [take] into account that you have child support, rent, utilities, and things like that."

Less-Than-Half-Time Enrollment Status

Several former students pointed out that attending college less than half time is another reason for being ineligible for some types of financial aid.[8] According to federal guidelines, less-than-half-time students can receive Pell Grants and Perkins Loans but not Direct or Family

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[4]Not all current and former students who had applied for Pell Grants, student loans, or work study were receiving those sources of aid, according to phone interview responses (Appendix Table A.1).

[5]In addition, several participants explained that they were not eligible for financial aid because of their status as recent immigrants or foreign students. Immigration and citizenship requirements differ for various types of financial aid. One reason that some immigrants are not eligible for financial aid is that they may lack documentation of high school credentials from their native country (Bosworth and Choitz, 2002).

[6]Other two- and four-year college students besides low-wage working parents may experience similar financial aid eligibility issues; one study of college leavers from one urban college system found that many survey respondents who considered themselves to have low income reported not being eligible for financial aid (Gittell and Holdaway, 1996).

[7]Bosworth and Choitz (2002) explain that for less-than-half-time students who are workers, in particular, the combination of relatively low tuition and a full-time income often means that they have too high an "expected family contribution" for Pell Grant calculations, even though they may not actually be able to afford tuition and other costs on their relatively low income. Further, less-than-half-time students may also have too low a "cost of attendance" to be eligible; for example, they cannot include room and board in calculating their cost of attendance, whereas half-time and full-time students can include those expenses (Bosworth and Choitz, 2002).

[8]This is an issue for low-wage working students and adult working college students in general: 46 percent of all adult undergraduate students who work full time are attending college programs less than half time, according to a recent analysis of the National Postsecondary Student Aid Survey (Bosworth and Choitz, 2002).

Education Loans.[9] However, many working students attending less than half time who could benefit from financial aid are determined to be ineligible for Pell Grants due to income or other reasons.[10]

Also, part-time students in general face a financial aid trade-off. If they attend college less than full time, they may not receive sufficient aid; but if they attend full time, they may be taking on more coursework than they can handle, given family and work responsibilities.[11] One student said, for example:

> If I went full time, they [financial aid] would pay for most of it — 90 percent they would pay. . . . But then I couldn't go full time, work full time, and go to school full time. It was just too hard. So I couldn't afford to take one or two classes, because then I would have had to pay for that out of my pocket.

Poor Academic Performance and Probation

Poor academic performance in the past also affects financial aid eligibility. Being on academic probation was a major reason given by former students for not being eligible for financial aid, including student loans. One former student described her experiences trying to get off probation status when her employment situation changed — and her belief that the college expected her to make education a priority over employment:

> I've been with the same company for six years, and I've changed different positions, which means your hours change, so I've had to withdraw from classes and then register for something else and then withdraw. So I've been on and off probation . . . and I bring in documentation from my job and . . . I have everything, and they [college staff] tell me school should be your priority . . . and I would say, "Well, that would be in the ideal world where you have rent, utilities, a car payment and phone bill, groceries, and a check. That would be ideal. However, that's not my situation, so how can you tell me what my priorities are?"

Focus group participants also talked about being on probation for failing or not completing a course as a result of such events as being hospitalized, losing their child care arrangements, or having to return to full-time work when a spouse became unemployed.

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[9]Bosworth and Choitz, 2002.
[10]Bosworth and Choitz, 2002.
[11]Bosworth and Choitz, 2002.

Defaults and Arrearages

Some of the former students had become ineligible for financial aid because of past defaults on student loans or owing Pell Grant or other scholarship funds for courses or semesters that had not been completed. One former student admitted misusing Pell Grant funds to buy a car; she has to repay that money before she can return to college and receive financial aid again. Another former student described owing Pell Grant funds because she had had to withdraw from college when her child care arrangements fell through; until she is able to pay back the funds, she cannot reenroll.

Financial Aid Services

Students in the focus groups discussed the quality and availability of assistance that they had received through the financial aid departments at their colleges. Current students reported more positive experiences than did former students, but, overall, both groups were more positive than negative about their financial aid departments. One student described the financial aid process at his college as "the easiest thing I have worked through; I get a quick response every time." Another student described how the financial aid department had intervened on his behalf when he needed to stop out of college for a brief period because his son was experiencing medical problems. A few of the potential students had also met with financial aid counselors or other staff at their local colleges, and one expressed that he had appreciated it when staff took the time to explain why he was ineligible for financial aid.

The focus group participants also shared some complaints about financial aid services at their colleges. One participant resented that mistakes had been made when calculating her financial aid award, resulting in an overpayment of a Pell Grant that she was expected to return to the college. Another student said that she did not believe there was anyone in the financial aid office to help students fill out applications.[12] A third student believed that one reason his financial aid department was not helpful was that it was seriously understaffed, given the demand for services. He explained:

> This college has a tremendous volume of people coming in but . . . I don't think they have the proper resources to handle that. . . . I don't see how two people in the financial aid office working during registration [are] going to help where the line actually extends to a point where you can actually bring your breakfast and consume your lunch and you still have not seen anyone yet.

[12]For colleges with more than one campus, it appeared that there might be some variation in opinions of financial aid services across the different campuses.

Participants also described some cash-flow problems that resulted from the timing of financial aid awards. One current student felt that it took too long to determine eligibility, offering as an example a personal experience in which a mistake on a financial aid form had made it necessary to reapply:

> Time obviously is an issue here. . . . I applied for financial aid electronically here through the school. I made one mistake . . . one little box that should have had an X did not have an X. They wrote me a letter. I called them up. I gave them the information on the phone — great, I'll have an answer in a week. No, that will take six weeks . . . and here I am. I'm sweating bullets because I'm saying . . . am I going to get it? Am I not going to get it? Can I get the monies in time [for registration]?

The current students, particularly, discussed how burdensome it is to research the available financial aid and scholarship programs and to learn about the various application processes — especially for working students and those who have family responsibilities. One student explained that, because of high student demand and long lines, a visit to the financial aid office could be a big commitment of time and could require her to miss a day of work. Another student explained that researching and applying for additional grants or scholarships was "almost like a full-time job, just filling out all the applications and the essays."

Guidance Counseling and Academic Advising

Focus group participants talked directly or indirectly about their needs for counseling services and about the availability and quality of services at their community colleges.[13] Participants from all groups talked about needing direction in selecting courses and programs of study, meeting graduation requirements, finding help for academic and personal problems, and getting general information about programs and services at the college.[14]

Making the Difference

A recurring theme across the three types of focus groups (current, former, and potential students) was the idea of looking for guidance and direction when making education-related

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[13]When participants related their experiences with counseling or advising services, it was not always clear whether they had interacted with official counseling/advising department staff or whether they had instead worked with faculty advisors or staff from special programs targeted at low-income students or other specific populations.

[14]In the phone interviews (Appendix Table A.1), most of the current and many former student respondents indicated that they had needed academic counseling while in college. Most of the former student respondents indicated that they would need academic counseling if they returned to college in the future.

decisions. Participants, especially current students, discussed specific instances in which the counseling services at their colleges had been a necessary support while they were enrolled. One former student described how her counselor had helped her achieve the right combination of courses to come up with a manageable workload:

> I had a counselor, she helped me a lot. She told me what courses to take, you know, how to balance my courses; she made sure that if one was hard then . . . the other two classes were easy. She was really good; she told me I could call her anytime.

One student who had formerly attended a different college in another state approved of its policy of making counseling or advising services mandatory for new students. Another student liked his program's approach of having a specific advisor who also acted as an industry liaison and could provide career planning and job placement assistance as well. He thought that having such a position might be the key to retaining students:

> I think one of our best resources in our engineering department, we have one advisor . . . her full-time job is just communicating with industry. . . . She gets the feedback and gives it straight to us. She helps us with our résumés. She passes out all the forms to fill out for the few scholarships that have to do . . . with the engineering program. And she just helps out . . . she'll help you find a job. She'll back you up. . . . And she is just an amazing person. If every department had one of those . . . every department would graduate many more students.

Other participants talked about counseling in a more general way. For example, one current student said that the "guidance [and] counseling" departments were "a tremendous help" in his continuing to matriculate. A former student talked about the need for helping students "make a game plan" the way that secondary and presecondary schools help students set goals and meet their graduation requirements. Another former student explained that, if she were going to reenroll in college, she would need someone to show her what to do and how to do it.

Looking for More Direction

Other students talked about ways in which they were dissatisfied with the counseling or advising services at their colleges. Former students, particularly, described experiences in which they felt that they needed more direction in making education decisions; for example:

> It was very hard to get in with a counselor who I felt like really understood what I needed. I mean, I really needed someone to line it out for me. I needed someone to say, what are your hours of availability and what are you think-

> ing right now? . . . And, actually help me, not just for that semester, but give like a year overview to sort of line it out so I could have positioned my classes more wisely. . . . I was just kind of floundering and I needed a little bit more direction, and every single time I would go back to the counseling office, I didn't really get that. That's nice; they want you to think on your own . . . but with children and with working and all the other things, . . . it was just too much.

Specific complaints about counseling services included not getting enough time with counseling staff, not having an assigned counselor, experiencing high staff turnover, and receiving inconsistent information.[15] Regarding the last complaint, one former student described an incident in which she sought information about the educational requirements to become a high school guidance counselor and was disappointed with the conflicting information she received from her college guidance counseling staff:

> I had gone to several different counselors or advisors, and I want to be a guidance counselor. That's my ultimate goal. And none of them seemed to know what prerequisites — what I need, what type of degree I need to get to be a guidance counselor, and I'm saying, "Okay, you're a guidance counselor. If you don't know, who knows?" and I've gone to each one of them. I've gone to the three different ones. They each told me something different.

Likewise, a current student said that he often received different information, depending on which advisor or counselor he talked to, which was very "confusing." Two current students shared anecdotes of how they had not been informed that they had acquired enough credits to meet their graduation or program requirements. In the first case, the current student had been out of college for many years, and it wasn't until she returned to her community college studies that she learned she could have received an associate's degree years earlier. She explained: "If I had known that years ago, I would have already had the associate's, and that might have pushed me to go back [to college]." In the second case, a current student had stumbled upon a program by inadvertently choosing its requirements:

> I didn't pick public services. I mean I didn't even know what that was. What happened was I took like an English class, a biology class, stuff that I knew that were the basic things and I already knew that it would transfer over.

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[15]Nationally, the student-to-counselor ratio can be quite high (Grubb, 2001a; Cohen and Brawer, 1996). One recent study found that for counseling and career guidance the average ratio was 434 full-time equivalent students to one counselor, based on a sampling of 252 public two-year colleges in 1998 (Douglas and Harmening, 1999). Given the prevalence of part-time students in community colleges, the ratio of part-time students to counselors may be much higher.

> Then I took classes . . . that interested me, sociology classes, social work classes, psychology classes. I started going through the catalogue . . . because I didn't have very good counseling . . . I was looking at the public service/human service option and [I find out] I'm a couple of quarters away from getting this degree that I didn't even know. Now I say . . . my degree is in public service . . . but before I was going toward mental health and sociology as well.

Participants also discussed the ways in which counseling or advising was triggered at their colleges — often in response to academic performance or at a student's request. One former student felt that by the time counseling staff sought her out because of slipping grades, it was really too late for her; she wished that they had tried to counsel her earlier, while she was doing well academically but having personal problems. A current student said that she had interacted with counseling staff only when she was in academic difficulty, but would have preferred sustained contact. Another student described her attempt to seek out counseling at the four-year college she had previously attended, explaining that counseling staff had paid more attention to her placement test scores than to her actual classroom experience:

> I tried the university, and I got in. I took the placement test, and I scored real high. I don't know how I did that. They put me in these classes, and the professor was just talking over my head. And I went down to my counselor, "Hey, I'm having problems." "No, you scored so good, you'll be okay." And I failed out.

In general, participants talked about being expected to figure out a lot on their own during college, which requires a great deal of knowledge, resources, and motivation. As one participant noted: "You are left so much on your own, that you may not complete it [your education]."

Finally, participants talked more generally about the need to add a personal counseling component to services offered at the college. One participant suggested that colleges take a "whole new approach" to counseling, suggesting that they "look at the person, take the person from the whole, the holistic approach like they do in [the] medical [profession], as far as taking care of you."

Special Programs

Many of the colleges included in this study offer special programs targeted at low-wage workers or other, overlapping groups, such as low-income students, women, adults and reentry students, displaced homemakers, and welfare or workforce development recipients. (Boxes 1.1

to 1.6 in Chapter 1 and Chapter 7 provide specific examples of special programs.) Through such programs, students like these receive combinations of services, including case management, financial assistance, tutoring, peer support groups, and help navigating other college services, such as financial aid and registration. Focus group participants — particularly the current students — discussed specific programs that they had used, noting that the staff and services were usually a major source of support for them while enrolled in college.[16] Participants often talked about combinations of special programs that gave them the resources they needed to persist. One student described several programs that had helped him simultaneously, explaining that two of the programs work well together and "really help us keep going. If you get to that middle hump, you know, you start getting bogged down and that sort of thing."

Participants also reported that special program staff, in and of themselves, were a source of support for working students. One former student said that finding a particular staff person was like "finding gold." Another participant described how special program staff gave her the motivation and assistance to persevere, even after she was no longer directly involved with that program:

> I think a lot of women in my position or single parents go through like a lot of abusive situations . . . and you get your self-esteem knocked down, and you don't see school being a possibility because . . . you just get so down and depressed. . . . And down on life. So, people like that [special program staff] step into your life sometimes, give you a backbone and push you to motivate you. . . . And give you some resources, you know, where they can make it possible. . . . It's people like that, that have helped me.

Several students described frustration with the sheer number and variety of special, often-overlapping programs and services and spoke of the need to better coordinate them. Likewise, some students felt that it would be helpful to streamline all the appointments and other requirements for the various special programs that they were involved in, because a lot of time went into activities like filling out paperwork and meeting with case managers in order to remain eligible for the programs.

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[16]Special programs may be a source of support for other groups of students besides low-wage working parents; indeed, Gittell and Holdaway (1996) report that special programs were viewed as important sources of support among four-year and two-year college leavers who were surveyed in a large urban college system.

The Information Gap

Although focus group participants were very pleased with special programs overall, their discussions revealed an important problem: Many participants had no idea that the programs exist or that they might be eligible for them. When one member of a focus group would mention a specific program, often the other members would remark that they had never heard of it. One current student said that she had attended college for several semesters before learning about two special programs for which she was eligible. Likewise, the potential students said that they did not know about special programs at their local colleges to help working students and adults enroll and persist.

Similar information problems were found concerning financial aid and counseling services. Clearly, some former students in the focus groups did not understand the rules regarding Pell Grants and student loans, and so they now must repay large sums of money before they can return to college and again receive aid. Other participants described not knowing anything at all about the availability of financial aid. One current student explained that she had not known that work-study funds or positions exist until she went to a special program at her college for low-income students. Two former students talked about how they had paid their college expenses out of pocket for several semesters — even years — because they initially had not known that financial aid is an option. Likewise, another participant explained that although the financial aid department advertises scholarships, it is difficult to track down the information and apply; she had been referred from person to person in the financial aid office as she sought the information she needed.

In terms of counseling services, one current student reported that if she had known that her college offers personal counseling, she would have "been first in line." In general, participants talked about a knowledge gap when it comes to support services available on campus, saying that they either had to track down the information themselves or get it from other students. One current student explained that while her college has a lot to offer in terms of supports, she had learned this only by word of mouth. Another student explained that the effort to get information can be one more commitment to juggle: "The time that you would spend based on misinformation that you get from one office [at the college], all other offices that you have to go to and wait in line just to speak to somebody, so you can spend two, three days just trying to solve one small thing." The information gap could also play a role in potential students' decisions about attending college. One current student believed that if people in her community knew what the local college has to offer, more people would enroll.

Conclusion

College-based services and supports — including financial aid, counseling, advising, and special programs — appear to have played a critical role for focus group participants, but learning about available services (or being eligible for them, especially in the case of financial aid) can be a barrier to low-wage workers' accessing or persisting in college programs. It is important to note that while the participants often talked about one or two specific supports that might make the difference in terms of entering college and completing programs, they also described the ways in which *combinations* of supports and services can be critical. A former student explained that the combination of a work-study placement and child care vouchers had made it possible for her to go to college and said that some sort of counseling intervention might have enabled her to persist when her financial assistance and academic performance changed:

> In the beginning, it was really easy for me because I was working. They had granted me work-study money, so I was working downstairs in the library and I had child care for my son, but then, once the grants ran out, I had to find a job and . . . [it was] real hard to find the kind of schedule that fits the school schedule. So I started going back to school. My grades were getting lower. I just stopped. . . . When they [grades] were going down, I was just feeling down, and . . . I needed some support to help me and then I would have not — like my self-esteem, it would have picked up. I just gave up on myself.

As is explored in Chapter 7, it is unlikely that any single institutional "fix" can improve low-wage workers' access or retention rates in community colleges; rather, a combination of supports and services will be required.

Chapter 5

Personal and Situational Supports and Barriers

The purpose of this chapter is to explore how personal and situational factors influence a low-wage working student's ability to access or complete postsecondary studies. During each of the focus group sessions, participants were asked to comment on the extent to which various factors (such as financial issues, child care, transportation, and family and peer relationships) do affect or might affect their ability to enroll in community college and complete a program of study.

Major Themes

- The factors discussed by most participants included balancing the responsibilities of work, family, and college (for the current and former students); the availability and quality of child care arrangements, parents' comfort level in using child care, and instructors' understanding about child care arrangements; family and peer relationships; and financial considerations.
- Important barriers to education for some participants included discrimination, housing, transportation, and physical or mental health issues relating to the participants or their family members.
- A few participants — primarily the potential students — described additional barriers to pursuing education, including domestic violence and legal issues (often related to immigration).

The focus group discussions raised a number of personal issues that impacted the participants' perception of pursuing or completing postsecondary education. As a group, the current students reported fewer personal barriers, significant relationships with family and peers, and greater stability in terms of income and housing. The former students reported a mixed set of supports and variable stability that changed often. The potential students generally reported multiple barriers, few family supports, and lives in constant flux — all of which limits the likelihood that postsecondary education is within their reach. In general, the experiences of current students and former students were more closely aligned than the experiences of potential students.[1] Table 5.1 summarizes how frequently these personal factors and barriers were discussed in each of the three types of focus groups.

[1]This likely reflects the parallel educational experiences of the two groups: Many current students, near program completion, had taken time off ("stopped out") at some point; similarly, many former stu-
(continued)

Table 5.1

Frequency of Discussions Related to Personal Factors

Heavily Discussed	Moderately Discussed	Infrequently Discussed
• Balancing the demands of life	• Discrimination	• Domestic violence
• Child care	• Housing	• Legal issues
• Family and peer relationships	• Transportation	
• Financial well-being	• Health	

SOURCE: Data from participant discussions at the Opening Doors focus group meetings.

NOTES: Topics to which 100-749 text units were coded were categorized as "infrequently discussed"; to which 750-1,399 text units were coded as "moderately discussed"; and to which 1,400 or more text units were coded as "heavily discussed." (Text units are discrete pieces of coded text representing an idea or theme.)

The analysis presented was conducted within all 18 focus groups, and the three groups of current, former, and potential students were combined.

Major Factors Expressed by Focus Group Participants

Balancing the Demands of Life

A clear theme that emerged across all the focus groups was the challenge of balancing the demands of life — which included work, family, and college for the current and former students — and dealing with recurring crises such as pending eviction, requests from extended family members, and financial concerns. College was but one responsibility in their very busy schedules. In most cases, participants were working or seeking employment and also had considerable family responsibilities. They described how difficult it was to juggle everything.[2] One former student who was combining work and college recalled an average day in her life:

> Sometimes I'll be crying, "Oh, this is so hard." I got two kids, one is 8, and I got another one that can't go to child care until 8:00 [A.M.] So, I'm pushing to get to work. Luckily I got a lenient boss [who] gives me 30 minutes . . . to

dents articulated their commitment to completing their education goals and viewed themselves as stopping out in order to work full time, meet family demands, or improve their financial stability.

[2]One study of college leavers (Gittell and Holdaway, 1996) found that issues related to balancing work and family were a major impetus for students to drop out, transfer, or take time off from college; specifically, money and employment issues were cited as reasons to leave college by 34 percent of study participants.

> get to work due to the fact of my schedule. And I was going to work and going to school. Working and going to school is real hard. I was working from 7:00 [A.M.] to like 3:00 [P.M.] My lunch hour was my class. . . . I had three classes for the week . . . my other two classes were like an hour, and one was like an hour and a half, another was like 45 minutes. That was after work. Then I had to rush to get the kids from daycare, which I was going late because my class would go over my daycare time. Well, finally I had no daycare, no baby-sitter, nobody to go pick the kids up from daycare. I had to leave class early to pick up my kids on time. And that hurt me because they started feeling a little lonely because I would be going all day [and] didn't see the kids. Get in the house, got to wash them and give them something to eat if they haven't already eaten at the daycare, get them in bed. By the time they get into bed, it's sometimes 10:00, 10:30, close to 11:00 [P.M.]

For many of the potential students, the demands of trying to keep their lives in balance meant that pursuing postsecondary education was not an option as they dealt with recurring or ongoing crises. For many of the former students, when the demands of life grew too great, postsecondary education was sacrificed while employment and family responsibilities took priority. For many of the current students, balancing their responsibilities meant continuing their commitment to education and sacrificing other aspects of their lives, including time spent with family and full-time work.

Child Care[3]

Across all the focus groups, when participants were asked to identify the primary factors that influenced their decisions to attend or complete college, child care was at the top of the list. Participants who had a stable child care arrangement viewed that as an integral support either for attending college or for allowing them to consider attending college in the future. As one current student said, "I know [that what] made it easier for me to go to school was finding quality child care."

The Need for Affordable, High-Quality Child Care During Class Hours

Although four of the six colleges in the study did offer some form of child care on campus, focus group participants clearly articulated a need for affordable, high-quality care that is

[3]Child care services varied widely across the four colleges in the study that offered them, and across campuses within those colleges, in terms of the age of children served, costs, eligibility requirements, the size of the waiting list, and the hours of care. For example, only one of Portland Community College's 10 campuses offered late-evening child care during the week, and only LaGuardia Community College offered child care on Saturdays.

available during class hours on evenings and weekends. (Table 5.2 lists examples of child care programs at the four colleges that offered them; in many cases, the colleges offered additional programs for different age groups, but the table shows only the program with the greatest capacity at each college.) Although most students were aware of the child care options on campus, many of them indicated that those options did not fit their needs well, for such reasons as that the child care program was limited to certain age groups (for example, toilet-trained children over 2 years old), the child care center had a long waiting list or limited capacity, or the hours of operation did not match class hours, especially on evenings and weekends. One potential student commented:

> Some of us have children, and the classes that we want to go to are at night. And there is no daycare that can take care of children from 8 to 10 at night.

Another current student objected to the age limits of on-campus child care:

> Here on campus the minimum [age] is 3 years old. And that's funny, because if you have a daycare center on campus, why are there minimum [age] requirements? . . . You know you are dealing with minorities and people at risk who are going to college.

Given the limited availability of formal child care on campus, some participants relied on informal care provided by relatives or friends, though they often encountered problems with the cost of the care or the reliability of the provider. One student who was supplementing formal child care with an informal baby-sitter's services on evenings noted:

> That's an extra $50 a week of paying somebody to watch them at night. Then, you have to really rely on them to see — that they pick them up from daycare to make sure they go there, make sure they eat, make sure everything is fine.

The Need for Instructors to Understand Child Care Issues

Many students in the focus groups described having negative experiences with college instructors regarding child care issues. Participants acknowledged that, even with the best child care arrangements, emergencies inevitably arise: A child gets sick just before class and the backup provider is not available, or a child has the flu or chicken pox during the week of final exams. Many participants expressed the sentiment that community colleges are not structured in

Table 5.2
Characterisitics of Selected Child Care Services at the Community Colleges That Offered Services

Characteristic	Cabrillo College	LaGuardia Community College	Portland Community College	Sinclair Community College
	Two Preschools	**Saturday Program**	**Sylvania Campus All-Day Preschool**	**Daycare**
Number of staff	Preschool #1: 5 Preschool #2: 8-10	3[a]	4	1:5 ratio
Hours of operation	8:45 A.M. - 5:30 P.M.	9:00 A.M. - 3:00 P.M.	8:00 A.M. - 4:00 P.M.	6:30 A.M. - 6:00 P.M.
Cost	$700/month	$4-$6/day	$920/term	$60/week[b]
Number of clients on waiting list	NA	15	3-4	40 (average)
Program capacity	Preschool #1: 18/day Preschool #2: 31/day	38/day	16/day	45/day
Offers extended daycare	No	No	No	No
Offers Sunday care	No	No	No	No
Offers Saturday care	No	Yes	No	No
Accommodates study time	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Accommodates work study or internship	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Age requirements	2 years old (pre-K)	3-12 years old	3-4 years old	3-6 years old (pre-K)

SOURCES: Cabrillo College Children's Center, LaGuardia Community College Early Childhood Learning Center, Portland Community College On-Campus Child Care Services, and Sinclair Community College Early Childhood Education Center.

NOTES: In many cases, the colleges offered additional programs for different age groups, but this table shows only the programs with the greatest capacity.

[a]These staff are available part time.

[b]A one-time registration fee of $25 is also required for this program.

a way that allows for such occurrences, and so an entire semester's work can be compromised by an emergency. One student summed up the problem:

> One day, she [the child care provider] did it to me. . . . I have a final, and then she said, "I can't take care of your kids." It was a final for my English class, . . . and I can't come [to the final]. I failed that class.

Uncertainty About the Effects of Extended-Hour Child Care

The focus group discussions of child care were not limited to its availability, convenience, quality, and cost. Some participants had access to child care subsidies and suitable care arrangements, but they expressed concern about the effects of extended-hour child care on their children's overall well-being. Many participants viewed their parenting role as vitally important and expressed a desire to spend more time with their children. Many felt the need to sacrifice or postpone their education goals in order to foster or maintain personal involvement in their children's lives. One potential student commented:

> And you don't even spend time with your kids. That is the biggest thing. I don't want to work all day and then go to school at night or work all night and go to school all day and then there's my kids, like, "Who are you?"

This kind of concern was also expressed by parents of school-age and adolescent children. One participant with older children explained:

> They are supposed to be grown and able to do things on their own, and I really have a problem with that because this is the age where the sex starts, this is the age where the drugs start. This is the age where they go out there robbing and stealing and everything else. This is the age where they really need somebody to protect them, to guide them, to lead them.

Family and Peer Relationships

The impact of family and peer support (or the lack of it) was another clear theme in the focus groups. Most participants across all three kinds of groups had at least one family member who had attended college (Appendix Table A.1). Participants talked about a variety of family relationships — with parents, children, and spouses or partners. Some students experienced active family support, characterized by continuous encouragement and specific assistance such as financial help or child care. This kind of support was instrumental in facilitating attending college. Other students experienced passive family support, characterized by sporadic encouragement and general words of support but very little specific assistance. Still other participants had no family support whatsoever.

Active family support often made it possible for participants to attend college, given the difficulties they had in balancing life's competing demands alone. One former student who was planning to return to college the next semester explained that, when she had last been enrolled, her family was a major asset:

> My grandfather was the only person in my family who had been to college besides me, so my whole family was like, "yeah," they [were] happy and especially my mom. She's like, every time I get a report card, she would want to see it, she frames it, she puts it on the wall.

Many participants, particularly the former and potential students, felt that they lacked family support or that the support was passive. As one student explained, his family was supportive until he actually asked for help:

> I think family support — I know mine, they're supportive all the way until I need some help. [They will say,] "You're going back to school? I'm proud of you." Then you say, "But, I can't go to school unless I get a ride." "Well, uh, hold on now. This going to school is too much for you. Don't go to school no more. Go and do something else."

A current student explained that although her husband thought that he was being supportive, his expectations about the amount of time required by college were unrealistic, and he was resentful as a result:

> When he said, "Okay, you can do it [go to college]," but when he said, "You could go to school," I think he said in his mind, "Oh, she is going to go to school. Then she is going to come home and do home stuff — not homework." . . . That was hard at first to get him to understand I need time to do my work, not just homework — that was hard. . . . I think that was the hardest thing, getting him to understand that it was not just going to school and coming back home — I had other stuff to do.

Other students and friends outside of college were another source of support for many participants, who talked about their peers' experiences with college, financial aid, and other shared concerns. Some current students came to the focus group sessions in pairs, as friends who clearly depended on each other for peer support in terms of coursework, child care arrangements, tutoring, or finding out college-related information. A current student noted:

> You know, we notice that we are strangers when we walk in that first day of class, but you know, one hour later, you just want to go over to the person that's sitting next to you and just give them a hug and say to them, you know, "I know why you're here and you know why I'm here, and we're going to

> get through this together," and I think that's something . . . that's why we're in a classroom environment.

Participants discussed how their pursuit of education affected their relationships with their children. Some parents noted positive impacts, including the opportunity to do homework together and to demonstrate to their children the importance of a college education:

> They [her children] helped me with math. . . . They were supportive in that way because, you know, it was nice because we were helping each other. Well she was helping me, but I also had to spend [time] with them and catch up on how they are doing in school.

Other participants noted that attending college had negative effects on their relationship with their children, including that the children were jealous of the parents' time in school and resented their being away from home.

Money Matters: The Direct and Indirect Costs of Attending College

All the focus groups discussed the financial implications of attending college, including both the direct costs (of tuition, books, and supplies, for example) and the indirect costs (especially the opportunity cost of reducing work and losing income while in college).[4] Many of the current students intentionally worked part time and sought out employers who were supportive of their education goals. They accepted a shorter-term financial trade-off in hopes of improving their overall financial well-being in the longer term. Compared with the former and the potential students, the current students generally had more financial support from a spouse, partner, or other family members. Their financial concerns centered on the reduction of household income while in school, frustration with academic programs that restrict work activity, and the expense of books. As one student noted:

> In my program, we need to keep all our books, and they cost us an arm and a leg. . . . So we don't get to trade them back in. We just count on spending $200, $300, $400 a term [on books].

Regarding their concerns about academic programs that restrict work activity, although students acknowledged the demands of certain academic programs, they felt that the financial needs of low-wage working students should be taken into account. A former student detailed her experiences with balancing full-time work, part-time school, and family responsibilities:

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[4]According to the phone interview results (Appendix Table A.1), the cost associated with attending college was one reason that some current students gave for considering dropping out.

> I got up, I ran a daycare out of my home, and then I split college and work in the evening. I waitressed at night because I could make more . . . money in a shorter period of time, and go to college the other days. . . . I did college and work, and then I ran a daycare during the day to pay the bills because it costs me money (a) to afford school [and] (b) for my kids because I was in school, someone else [had] to watch them. I even got really creative and asked the neighbor downstairs to swap me back and forth. I'd take her kids in my day-care for no cost if she'd take my kids when I was at school [in the evenings]. And I just burnt myself right out.

Situational Factors Affecting Participants' Goals

Participants mentioned four other factors that affected their ability to enroll in or complete a community college program: discrimination, housing, transportation, and health issues.

Discrimination: Getting a Fair Shake

Issues of discrimination are important because they affect an individual's likelihood of completing an education and, after that, of being treated fairly in the labor market. The focus group participants described experiences with discrimination based on their race/ethnicity, age, pregnancy, and parenting status. Their examples of discrimination are wide-ranging and occurred in many settings, including on campus, in the workplace, in rental housing, and at government agencies.

A potential student, who is white, described this experience at her job:

> [My employer] did a thing called shift bid. So, I was trying to get off midnights. . . . The day before a shift bid, I was talking to one of the managers and she had asked me about my daughter, and I showed her a picture and she went, "Oh, her father must be black." It was just the way she said it that you could just tell. Shift bids came out the next day, and I'll be damned if I wasn't stuck on midnights. You could just tell that she was just so appalled with the idea.

Another potential student, who is African-American, also encountered discrimination in the workplace:

> I have been faced with it so many times. I have trained girls, white girls that come in. I have trained them, and they have given them the position over me. I mean that has been happening to me since I was about 18.

Gender discrimination was described by a female student who was working as a security guard:

> Well, now there's a lot of females, a lot of female guards, but it's mostly men. So it was hard because like the males were like always hitting on me, but then I go tell the supervisor. The supervisor is hitting on me, and then it's like I was getting nowhere with the complaints.

Several students reported examples of discrimination by staff in community colleges. One potential student described losing a scholarship because she is a parent:

> I would have already been to school if they [a community college in a different state] didn't discriminate against me because I had a child. I had a full scholarship. You know . . . they offered a nursing program when I was about 19 years old, and we had to take a test, and the highest score gets the financial aid. I scored and I got in, and when they found out I had a child, they turned me down because I had a child.

Other students felt that they were treated differently because of their age:

> I think the professors at the college aren't helpful to older students. They just think you are here because . . . for fun. You know, they think you are here just to take a class because you have nothing better to do all day. You are not here as a student.
>
> Sometimes professors don't appreciate older people in the classroom.

Discrimination is a sensitive topic that may have been underreported by these participants in a group setting.[5] Yet their reported incidences of unequal treatment suggest that some potential, current, and former students do experience illegal discriminatory practices — and that community college administrators, welfare administrators, and employers need to take immediate steps to end discrimination in their organizations.

Housing: An Important Factor

Access to stable and affordable housing was raised primarily by the focus group participants in the Santa Cruz area, where housing costs are among the highest in the nation. Those with unstable housing discussed their experiences with pending evictions, trying to locate affordable housing, housing discrimination, and living in homeless shelters or unsafe housing. All

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[5]Studies of response accuracy suggest that there is a tendency among respondents to underreport answers that may not be socially desirable or that yield sensitive information (see Fowler, 1998).

such situations factor into an individual's ability to access and complete a college education. A current student commented:

> As a parent, it can be difficult to rent a room out of a house; the lesser expensive rentals where you get in for $400 or $500 a month or even $350, they don't want a child. Not even part time. They just say, "Sorry. No, we don't want kids in the house." You are shunned right away.

Some of the current students described moving in with friends or parents to reduce housing costs while attending college. Overall, the participants who had good housing indicated that it was a critical support that enabled them to attend or consider attending college.

Transportation: Getting to Class

Across all three types of focus groups, about a third of the participants described transportation as being a barrier to their education, and for some it was the primary barrier.[6] Most participants had access to vehicles or reliable public transportation, although a few expressed problems with frequent car repairs or inconvenient bus connections. In short, participants identified transportation as a key factor in being able to attend college, but, for most of them, lack of transportation was not the primary barrier to getting an education. Participants suggested that community colleges could reduce the number of trips that students need to make to campus by including more on-line services, such as course registration.

Health Factors: Personal and Family Well-Being

Participants talked about both personal and family health problems that interfered with attending college and that, in some cases, led a student to drop out or stop out of college. Across all focus groups, participants discussed the impact of pregnancy on accessing and completing college. They also discussed various physical and mental health problems that interfered with their postsecondary plans or their family's daily functioning. These health issues included, for example, depression, cancer, agoraphobia, substance abuse, alcoholism, and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD).

Both the current and the former students discussed the impact of pregnancy on pursuing postsecondary education. A former student noted:

> When I was taking my accounting class two years ago, I was planning [on] continuing. . . . My daughter is going to be in kindergarten, and I was going

[6]Phone interview results (Appendix Table A.1) show that small percentages of both current students and former students needed help with transportation.

> to work part time and go to school part time and really finish, and then I got pregnant with my son. . . . I mean, that was a big factor because now I haven't gone back to school and my kids are so far apart in age that it will be five years before he is in school. So, yeah, that is a big factor in hindering my schooling.

Other participants discussed mental health issues that influenced their ability to attend college. One participant described her experiences with clinical depression:

> I think one thing that really set me back, like a year, was just a personal thing. I went through a depression, and I don't know if it was because I was in my early twenties. It could be because I was in school. I don't know. I took full loads of 12 units, one fall and spring, and . . . I think I passed two units out of like 30 that year, and that was just because I was drinking a lot and eating a lot and smoking a lot and doing a lot of bad things. It was all because of depression. That's one big thing I think a lot of people deal with.

Another student described taking time off from college because her child had ADHD:

> I quit for a few years. My son has ADHD and he has a lot of problems, and I was having problems with working, school, and him. So I quit for a little while just for that reason and just came back this year.

Although many focus group participants had health insurance through Medicaid or their employer, some had ongoing health concerns that they were neglecting. One student, for example, had been putting off a needed surgery because of the length of time it would take from work and the resulting loss of income:

> I need to have surgery too, and it's going to require me to be out [of work] for a whole week. . . . I've been putting it off. . . . I really need to hurry up, I need to take care of it because they're, like, I'm too young, and they want me to have the surgery.

Other Barriers to Education

The focus groups also discussed such important barriers to education as domestic violence and legal issues, including immigration concerns. As noted earlier, however, because these topics are sensitive, they may have been underreported in the focus groups. The fact that they were discussed infrequently may or may not indicate low prevalence.

Domestic Violence

Previous or ongoing issues regarding domestic violence were raised in many of the focus groups, most often by potential students. Three key issues that emerged were (1) the graphic nature of the physical abuse incurred, (2) the lack of support for the victims by law enforcement agencies, and (3) the lenient sentences imposed on the perpetrators by the legal system.

When asked whether it would have been possible to attend college while living with an abusive partner, one potential student explained that the severity of the abuse made it impossible:

> [I was] choked with a belt while he made me watch in the mirror until I was unconscious, dragged up and down [the highway]. Asphalt [burns] this big and then thrown in boiling hot showers. Nothing would have been possible.

Other participants described a lack of support from law enforcement agencies in addressing domestic violence. For example:

> I walked out to my car and he pulled me out [of] the window. And the police officer had the nerve to ask me while I'm in the gurney getting into the ambulance, was I screaming at him or [doing] something to provoke him?

For focus group participants who were ongoing or recent victims of domestic violence, the thought of pursuing postsecondary education was overshadowed by immediate needs for safety and survival. These participants clearly expressed that domestic violence is a substantial barrier to attending or completing studies at a community college.

Legal and Immigration Issues

Legal issues — primarily centering on immigration — were also mentioned in the focus groups, disproportionately by the potential students. Participants explained that having a work permit and a Social Security card is not sufficient for entering college; foreign students also need a "green card" to show their permanent residency status. One potential student described his difficulties in trying to get access to the local college's assistance program for immigrants:

> The problem is the systems they have at the college, they are not well developed, or they don't have the right step to go [to]. . . . Sometimes they don't have the right person [at the college] explaining over there. . . . I have those problems a couple of years back when I tried to get into college . . . have my work authorization. . . . I went there [to the college] . . . but they don't point me that way [to a special program to help immigrants]. I've been asking how to get into college . . . and this time when I went . . . they asked me again and they showed me [about the special program]. . . . [I told them,] "Nobody told

me [about the program before]." They said, "Did you ask?" "Yes, I asked — that was the information that I was asking about."

Conclusion

No single factor accounts for why some low-wage working students complete a post-secondary program while others never pursue a college education. Yet some factors, such as having reliable child care and strong family relationships, are frequently identified as important supports. The findings in this chapter suggest that low-wage workers — whether current, former, or potential students — face ongoing, difficult challenges in their personal lives and that they often have few financial or personal resources to support them.

Many focus group participants experienced multiple personal barriers to education, including child care issues, financial problems, personal or family health concerns, discriminatory treatment, domestic violence, and legal issues. In general, the current students who were near program completion reported fewer such barriers, although they also reported having to stop out of college a time or two. The former students are a mixed group: Some expressed an interest in finishing their education and will likely return to college, without any special intervention; others value education but, like the potential students, need the income that comes with full-time employment.

The potential students seemed to be most affected by such barriers as domestic violence, health problems, immigration issues, and financial difficulties. Without significant and multiple resources to support them, they are unlikely to be able to pursue higher education in the foreseeable future.

To be effective, any public policy aimed at increasing the enrollment and completion rates of low-wage working students at community colleges must strongly address these barriers and minimize their effects. The findings suggest that public policy efforts to reduce the overall number and magnitude of these barriers must be cast broadly and must engage community colleges as well as community and governmental resources.

Chapter 6

External Factors: Employers and Government Agencies

This chapter presents the focus group participants' experiences with employers and government agencies and the roles they play in supporting or impeding low-wage workers' efforts to pursue postsecondary education.

Major Themes

- Loss of income due to reduced work hours along with employers' lack of flexibility about work schedules were major concerns for the focus group participants. Although employers' tuition reimbursement programs were a support for some current students, others felt that they could not take advantage of such programs because of various restrictions attached to them.
- The participants cited some government programs as being critical supports. In particular, they mentioned the Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), Section 8, and Food Stamp programs. Although welfare and workforce development programs enabled some current and former students to attend college, many participants felt that they could not use these systems as a support for postsecondary education.

Employers

Many of the low-wage working students in the study sample needed to combine employment with education. Among all participants, 74.1 percent were employed, though the rate for current students (92.0 percent) was much higher than for former students (58.7 percent) or potential students (68.6 percent). However, current students worked fewer hours per week (26 hours), on average, than former or potential students (37.5 hours and 35.2 hours, respectively). As a group, former students had the longest tenure in their current job — 28.1 months, compared with 19.4 months for current students and 10.0 months for potential students. (Table 2.1, in Chapter 2, presents selected demographic and economic characteristics of participants by group.)

Study participants held an array of jobs. As Table 6.1 shows, 29.8 percent were employed in office and administrative support positions. Other common occupations included sales, education, human services, laborer, and food service. Current and former students were two times more likely than potential students to be employed in office and administrative support

Table 6.1

Job Categories of Employed Focus Group Participants

Job Category	Percentage of Current Students	Percentage of Former Students	Percentage of Potential Students	Percentage of Full Sample
Office and administrative support	38.0	34.3	17.4	29.8
Sales	12.0	11.4	17.4	13.7
Education	10.0	2.9	4.3	6.1
Management	8.0	2.9	0.0	3.8
Health care	6.0	5.7	6.5	6.1
Human services	6.0	14.3	2.2	6.9
Cosmetology	4.0	0.0	0.0	1.5
Food service	4.0	2.9	10.9	6.1
Maintenance	4.0	0.0	4.3	3.1
Service	2.0	2.9	2.2	2.3
Technology	2.0	5.7	0.0	2.3
Laborer	2.0	11.4	17.4	9.9
Self-employed	2.0	0.0	0.0	0.8
Missing	NA	5.7	17.4	7.6
Sample size	50	35	46	131

SOURCES: MDRC calculations using data from written surveys administered at the Opening Doors focus group meetings. Job category construction was guided by the Occupational Outlook Handbook, 2002-03 edition, available from the Bureau of Labor Statistics in the U.S. Department of Labor. See http://www.bls.gov/oco/home.htm.

NOTES: Nonresponses for the items in which the nonresponse rate for all specific characteristics was 5 percent or higher across the three groups are shown as "missing." The nonresponses for all other items were excluded from the calculations.

Participants who were unemployed at the time of the focus group meetings were asked to give the job title and description of their most recent job.

positions. Potential students were more likely than current or former students to be employed in food service positions.

Important differences regarding the role of employment emerged among the current, former, and potential students. Overall, the current students viewed employment as important but needed it to be structured to facilitate attending college; job opportunities that interfered with their education goals were not considered as viable options. The former students viewed employment as essential and clearly stated their need for ongoing financial stability; if forced to choose between education and employment, the former students would select employment. The

potential students also considered employment important, but they had less job stability and career direction than the other groups.[1]

Many of the former and potential students expressed concerns regarding the financial implications of attending community college. Specifically, they worried about the loss of income that would result if they reduced their current level of employment. Given their need to work full time, many former and potential students did not see college as a realistic option. Those who had tried in the past to combine part-time school with full-time work had found it difficult. Although many wanted to finish (or start) school, it was not feasible for them to reduce their work hours and income. Two former students commented:

> This is reality for me . . . for me to come back to school and for me to come to school like I want to, I got to have money to pay my rent and my [utilities]. I mean that's the bottom line.

> When the cash flow was short, I had to drop out of school because I was going for an engineering degree, and I was doing really good in school. But they started messing me up because I had to find all different ways to pay bills. . . .That starts to take the toll. I came to class and was nodding off and [not] picking up the information or retaining it.

Potential students expressed similar concerns, noting their need to work full time in order to provide for their families. A potential student explained:

> I'd like to go back to school . . . because I make $9 an hour now. If I had my certificate here, I can work in the hospital and make $15 to $20 an hour, which is a big difference — good medical [benefits], good everything. They make it really hard for single parents because they can't give you any financial aid, so it's like you can't work, have the kids, and pay for school, and keep your house. It just doesn't work.

Wanted: Flexible Employers

The focus group participants described mixed experiences in how flexible their employers were about allowing them to combine work with school. Many current students intentionally sought out flexible employment to support going to college; some even quit jobs that interfered with college or switched positions with their employer to facilitate attending. The cur-

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[1]The measure of job stability was the number of months spent with the most recent employer. The potential students had spent much less time, on average, with their most recent employer than had the current or former students.

rent students definitively prioritized college over work, in contrast to many former and potential students. It may seem like an easy choice — to forgo full-time work for a relatively short time in order to complete a certificate program or degree — but the personal and situational factors discussed in Chapter 5 (such as child care, family relationships, and domestic violence) strongly shape the realities of this decision.

Even among current students, some placed a greater premium on having a flexible employer than others. One student described how having a flexible employer made it possible for her to go to college:

> They are really flexible. They understand and they help. . . . Sometimes if I have a test or something and I am not sure of something, I'll ask them. . . . They are really nice about it. They understand especially around finals. Instead of working five days, I work four days, or take afternoons off, or some mornings off.

One student felt that college had to fit her work schedule, while another had left a job to obtain a different one at the college, allowing her to concentrate more on her studies:

> Well, it wasn't that much of a flexible [employer] — it was more like, I need a job. School had to be flexible instead of the job being flexible, and I was lucky enough to find something that was flexible.

> I ended up leaving a job to go to [the college job] because it was really hard. They were not flexible, but she [the employer] couldn't be flexible because she had to have people there when she needed them there. I said I had to leave there because I could not study — on Friday, Saturday, or Sunday — one of those days that we were representing like a store or . . . for an application. You had to be there — there was like no question — if you said you were going to be there that week, then you had to be there. No "buts" — if you had a test you had to be there, so I had to leave that job.

In general, the current students sought out on-campus employment that offered greater flexibility and empathy for their responsibilities as students. A current student explained that there were lots of jobs on campus: "You just go to the career center and look for a job." However, one potential student had taken a job on campus in order to gain access to tuition reimbursement but was disappointed to learn that she had to hold the job for a year before she could qualify. Similarly, some former students who had worked on campus were unable to return to college and complete their programs because of other factors in their lives.

The Trade-Offs of Employers' Tuition Reimbursement Programs

Many participants reported that their employers offered tuition reimbursement programs.[2] Some who took advantage of these programs considered them extremely helpful. One current student explained that he received nearly free tuition as long as he maintained good grades in his coursework:

> But it's a nice deal. I mean I don't get my . . . books or anything like that, but it's a nice deal to have. It encourages you to, like, work hard and get, you know, good grades. . . . And then when you do, you know, you get a reward for it. So I think that's kind of nice.

Others were wary of participating in reimbursement programs. Some did not believe that their coursework would qualify, explaining that employers would reimburse only for "job-related" courses. Others did not want to commit either formally or informally to remain with that employer for a certain number of years after graduation. Instead, they were seeking post-secondary credentials in order to find employment with another company or in another industry altogether. One current student explained why she would not sign up for her employer's tuition reimbursement program:

> They require you to sign a contract stating that if you quit within less than three years after they have given you a check, you have to pay that money back to them. I don't plan on staying there that long, so I am not taking any money from them.

Other participants either worked for employers that did not offer tuition reimbursement options or were not aware of any options if they did exist.

No Education Benefits for Part-Time Employees

Some former students reported being in a Catch-22 position regarding education and work: They needed to be full-time workers to receive employer-sponsored benefits, such as tuition reimbursement; but in order to succeed in school, given their family responsibilities, they needed to work part time. For example, one participant explained:

> Two out of my previous employers offered reimbursement for courses, so they encouraged you to go out, continue your education. Full reimbursement for your registration, book costs. . . . They were accommodating in that when

[2]This may not be typical for employers of low-wage workers. Bosworth and Choitz (2002) cite a National Center for Education Statistics report (Lee and Clery, 1999) suggesting that employers tend to provide more financial support for education to higher wage-earners with higher education levels.

they expect other workers to do overtime; they didn't do that for students. But, at the same time, they expected you to be there for your regular shift, so they weren't flexible.

Government Agencies

The focus groups also explored the degree to which participants relied on support services or financial assistance from government agencies.[3] Although many negative comments were made about government assistance, the current and former students reported positive experiences more often than the potential students.

A Helping Hand

Some participants reported having received financial assistance and other supports from government programs that had proved helpful while attending college. Specifically, students were positive about WIC, Food Stamps, and Section 8 housing. Two participants commented:

> I would say that WIC is one of the best programs out there, and I plan to donate a lot of money to that organization at some point. . . . You just bring in one pay stub. You don't have to go through a long screening process or papers, and they supply food vouchers for you and your children, and I just think that is a program that truly helps people.

> Right, that's been my biggest thing [support]. That was having Section 8; I've been on Section 8 since [19]93 and that was in [another state]. And the beautiful thing about Section 8 is that you can transfer that to [any state]. It's a federal program.

Mixed Experiences with Welfare and Other Assistance Programs

Large site differences probably exist in terms of local welfare rules about counting postsecondary education toward the work requirement. Box 6.1 describes both the federal welfare regulations and the various state and local rules in each site. State policies range from Califor-

[3]Participants talked mainly about welfare agencies, but the specific agency or program could not always be determined. In some sites, for example, workforce development agencies and welfare agencies were colocated in One-Stop Career Centers, and participants may have been receiving services from both.

nia's (which allows college to count toward the work requirement for 18 to 24 months) to Oregon's (where postsecondary education usually does not count toward the work requirement.)[4]

A current student explained how staff at the welfare and the workforce development agencies were critical supports:

> My [TANF] caseworker has been great — she has been my support system. She has helped me . . . go through the One-Stop.[5] Also my One-Stop counselor has been great — never had a problem. Always try to bend some rules for me. Do this and we'll help you if you do that, and they help me out.

Most participants, however — especially the potential students — reported negative experiences with TANF and workforce development programs in getting assistance to pursue a college education. They felt that these government programs were not geared toward working low-income families but instead were targeted to the unemployed. Some of the potential students believe that there is a Catch-22 when it comes to seeking education and training assistance through the welfare and workforce development systems. They explained that when they applied for assistance, they received information about education and training options, but they first had to go through the job search process. If they found work — which many did, since they had years of work experience — they were no longer eligible for education and training assistance, in some states. One participant explained that she would have had to purposely act inappropriately during her job interviews to qualify for education and training assistance from her local One-Stop Career Center:

> I feel like we're being punished because we actually went and did what was better for our family, work. . . . I feel like if you just live off of somebody else and just do the community service and never want to do anything and mess up on your interviews, then they pay for your college, because that's what my sister did. She would go in jeans to her interviews.

Participants talked about assistance from community-based organizations to a lesser extent, although some mentioned local churches that were sources of personal, spiritual, or financial support.

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[4]The researchers were not able to do cross-site analysis because of the extremely small sample sizes. Anecdotally, however, the focus group responses appear to correspond mostly with each state's policies on combining welfare, work, and education. In general, more positive comments about assistance from the welfare system were reported by the current students at Cabrillo College than by students at any other site.

[5]The Workforce Investment Act of 1998 called for the creation of a nationwide system of One-Stop Career Centers to integrate more than a dozen federal employment and training programs, as well as state and local services, in one centralized location. For more information, see National Governors Association Center for Best Practices (1998).

Box 6.1

Federal Policies and Opening Doors Colleges' State or Local Policies Regarding Education and Training and the Work Requirement for Welfare Recipients

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Federal Welfare Reform Rules Regarding Education and Training

By 2002, all states were required to have work requirements of at least 30 hours per week for single-parent families. To meet those requirements, participants have to be involved in "work activities" for the first 24 months they are receiving cash assistance, and they must "engage in work" thereafter. States have flexibility in defining both work activities and work, and they thus can include postsecondary education or training as an allowable activity.

States can count only up to 12 months of vocational education toward their work rate, and no more than 30 percent of the caseload that is counted toward a state's participation rate can be involved in vocational education or completing high school. With large caseload reductions — and the caseload reduction credit that states can receive toward the work participation rate — many states can effectively involve more than 30 percent of their caseload in postsecondary education for more than one year and still meet the work participation rate (based on Golonka and Matus-Grossman, 2001).

Opening Doors Colleges' State or Local Policies

California (Cabrillo College): Education and training, including postsecondary education, can count toward the work requirement (32 hours per week) for the first 18 to 24 months of receiving cash assistance. There are county-by-county differences in terms of whether welfare recipients are given the option of attending college full time if doing so fulfills the work requirement (which may require part-time work or a work-study assignment), and Santa Cruz County (Cabrillo's location) has opted to allow this.

Florida (Valencia Community College): Welfare recipients can attend college for up to 12 months without a work requirement (30 hours per week), given proof that the training is needed to obtain employment.

Michigan (Macomb Community College): Michigan has two education and training options. The first is for students already making progress toward a postsecondary degree; they may combine work with college for up to one year, to complete their program, with 10 hours of classes, 10 hours of homework, and 10 hours of work being counted to meet the 30-hour work requirement. The second option is to meet the work requirement by attending an intensive vocational education or training program in lieu of work for up to six months.

New York (LaGuardia Community College): The state allows counties to set their own rules regarding whether postsecondary education can fulfill the work requirement. New York City usually does not count education toward meeting the work requirement (35 hours per week for single parents).

Ohio (Sinclair Community College): The state allows counties to set their own rules regarding whether postsecondary education can fulfill the work requirement (40 hours per week) for up to 24 months. In Dayton, education (usually combined with work) can fulfill the work requirement on a case-by-case basis.

Oregon (Portland Community College): Welfare recipients cannot attend college to fulfill the work requirement (40 hours per week), although some short-term vocational training may be allowed (less than six months). The state rules allow for flexibility around allowed activities based on individual circumstance.

SOURCES: Data from interviews with college, welfare, and workforce administrators in the six Opening Doors sites; Golonka and Matus-Grossman, 2001; Greenberg, Strawn, and Plimpton, 2000; State Policy Documentation Project (www.spdp.org).

Conclusion

In general, the current and former students in the focus groups reported more positive experiences while attending community college when they were also able to work part time. This allowed them to balance the demands of work, family, and school and avoid burnout. The problem is that few students — especially single parents — can afford to work only part time. Without full-time employment, their ability to meet their family's basic needs is compromised. Employers thus play an important role in helping working parents enroll in and stay in community college programs. In particular, the focus group participants discussed the benefits of a flexible work schedule, tuition reimbursement programs, and supportive employers.

The participants described mixed experiences in pursuing education with assistance from government welfare and workforce development programs. Some current and former students described receiving critical supports for combining work and college (such as WIC, Section 8 housing, and Food Stamps), while others felt that the programs have important gaps. For example, individuals who are working may be ineligible for public assistance, which may put higher education out of their reach.

Chapter 7

Solutions and Conclusions

This chapter summarizes key similarities and differences among the focus groups of current, former, and potential students in the Opening Doors study and details some promising approaches to increase low-wage workers' access and retention rates in postsecondary programs leading to graduation. The chapter suggests some educational, financial aid, and student support service strategies to encourage more potential students to enroll in college, attract more former students to return, and retain all students once enrolled. The chapter also highlights some promising partnerships among colleges, public agencies, private employers, and community-based organizations that could support the access and retention strategies described.

Comparing Current, Former, and Potential Students

Although the three types of focus groups shared some similarities, they also differed in important ways (Table 7.1).[1] Overall, the current and potential students represented opposites, in terms of their attitudes and priorities regarding education and employment and in the stability of their personal lives. The former students fell in the middle, sharing some characteristics of both current and potential students.[2]

While there were individual exceptions, the current students appeared to place the greatest priority on going to college; school was more important to them than employment. Although they were not aware of all the college or community programs and services available to support their continuing education, they were more "system savvy" than the other participants. Although some current students were in a state of personal crisis or had been "former" students in the past, overall they described having relatively fewer personal barriers to attending college and relatively better support systems (both at home and at college), compared with former and potential students. As a result, they may have been able to negotiate work hours that accommodated their school schedules, even if it sometimes meant working part time. In some cases, the current students had switched jobs or stopped working altogether to concentrate fully on their studies.

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[1] See Chapter 2 and Table 2.1 for information about the demographic, educational, and economic characteristics of the three types of groups, which may account for differences in their priorities. For example, the current students tended to be younger, on average, than members of the other two groups.

[2] These observations represent snapshots of participants' attitudes at the time of the focus group sessions and, in some cases, during the follow-up phone interviews. It is likely that the three types of students also represent a continuum of experiences; for example, when the former students were last enrolled in college, they might have shared the viewpoints expressed by the current students in this study.

Table 7.1

Comparison of Current, Former, and Potential Students' Attitudes About Education, Employment, and Their Personal Lives

Group	Attitudes About Postsecondary Education	Attitudes About Employment	Attitudes About Personal Lives
Current Students	• Highest value placed on college • College higher priority than employment in short term • Demonstrated most knowledge about available college programs and services (system savvy)	• Employment has to support going to college • Relative job stability, although less than former students	• Most stable personal lives • Appeared to have greatest family support
Former Students	• Viewed college as important but of lower priority than current students • More knowledgeable about college programs and services than potential students but less so than current students	• Highest value placed on employment at present • Greatest job stability	• Mixed set of supports and barriers • Lives more stable than potential students but less so than current students
Potential Students	• Most (but not all) valued college, usually in an abstract way • Demonstrated very little knowledge about college programs or services	• Employment high priority but less so than for former students • Least job stability	• Highest value placed on stabilizing personal life • Lives in constant state of flux • Appeared to have least amount of family support

SOURCE: Data from participant discussions at the Opening Doors focus group meetings.

The former students, in contrast, had to give employment priority over education, even though many hoped to return to college and finish their program in the future. They appeared less likely than current students to consider switching jobs or reducing their work hours to fit college into their schedules. Some former students benefited from the college courses they had taken in the past; as a group, their average salary was higher than average salaries for other types of participants. The former students appeared to have fewer supports and more barriers to education than the current students, but they also appeared to have much more support and greater stability in their lives than the potential students.

Finally, the potential students demonstrated the least knowledge about college and the weakest intention to enroll; in many cases, their employment was also characterized by instability. In some sites, half the potential students did not have a General Educational Development (GED) certificate or a high school diploma and thus faced some very real academic barriers to attending college. The potential students' personal lives appeared to be in a constant state of flux.

The following sections of the chapter examine strategies to increase community college access and retention based on educational approaches, financial aid approaches, creative public and private partnerships, and student support service approaches. In the educational approach, colleges would play the primary role, whereas in the support service approach, colleges would likely need additional resources or partnerships with public and private institutions (such as welfare and workforce development agencies, community-based organizations, and employers) to provide new or expanded student support services. Many of the strategies discussed on the following pages may increase community college access and retention for students in general, not just for students with low-incomes, children, or jobs.

In adopting and implementing the following strategies, colleges and their potential partners face difficult choices about whether to target services to specific groups of students through special programs or to make services universally available to all students. Indeed, other research suggests that many of the services described below would benefit undergraduates in general.[3] There are trade-offs to both service approaches. Although special programs can target limited resources to students who are most at risk of dropping out, this approach raises coordination issues for colleges in offering multiple programs and services for different groups of students (and raises equity issues concerning students who are ineligible but might also benefit from participating). Targeted services may also stigmatize the students who receive them. A universal

[3]Cohen and Brawer (1996), for example, review research on community college leavers and list reasons that are similar to this study's findings for why students drop out or take time off from college, including "health problems, difficulty obtaining child care, financial burdens, and inconvenient class scheduling" (p. 63). This work and other research cited throughout this report describe a general need for counseling, remediation, child care, and other services for community college students.

approach, on the other hand, may be more equitable and less stigmatizing but will more likely require substantial resources to ensure that all students who might benefit are actually served.

The next section also includes examples of promising educational and student support service approaches implemented by the Opening Doors colleges or other community colleges. Few of these approaches have been subject to rigorous evaluation, but they were identified by the focus group discussions and interviews with administrators. Further research is required to test the effectiveness of each approach and would offer valuable information to colleges and their public or private partners interested in attracting and retaining greater numbers of low-wage working adults.

Educational Approaches to Increasing Community College Access and Retention for Low-Wage Workers

The data from the Opening Doors focus groups suggest that many personal, institutional, and other reasons affect an individual's ability to pursue or complete a community college education but that there is no single-bullet solution to recruiting and retaining low-wage working students. Nonetheless, several educational approaches rise to the top in terms of importance. Some of these were explicitly suggested by focus group participants, while others — although not directly addressed in the focus groups — were raised through meetings with college administrators.[4]

Nontraditional Course Formats

Many focus group participants described this dilemma: They could not afford to reduce their work hours and increase their course load to complete their college program more quickly, and yet going to college while working full time meant that it could take three to five years to earn a credential. Short-term certification programs, supported distance learning, and flexible scheduling may be more responsive to working students' needs.

Short-term certification programs. These models could also include partnering with employers or trade associations in high-growth industries; offering flexible, modularized courses; integrating basic academic and technical skills; and providing the opportunity to earn credit toward an associate's degree or beyond. Sinclair Community College's Access to Better Jobs program offers such short-term options, while Macomb Community College's Machinist

[4]The following discussion of educational approaches is by no means exhaustive. As indicated in Chapter 2, the study's focus was largely on scheduling and support service issues for students; it did not explore instruction, pedagogy, curricula, or other important education issues in depth. It is likely that these other issues also interact with students' decisions to attend or complete college programs, but they are beyond the purview of this study.

Training Institute in four months provides participants with credits toward an associate's degree as well as industry certification to gain machinist positions with good wages.

Supported distance learning. To give working parents more flexibility in terms of when they attend classes and to reduce transportation and child care barriers, colleges could offer supported distance learning for certain programs. Some participants across all three types of focus groups expressed interest in distance learning, although others clearly preferred traditional face-to-face interaction. Ideally, distance learning would be combined with some on-campus classroom work — to create cohorts among students — and would provide a great deal of remote and in-person support. Washington State's Shoreline Community College is pilot-testing a model, the Learn@Home program, in which welfare recipients can borrow and then keep laptop computers if they complete specified distance learning objectives. Portland Community College has been considering offering its distance learning courses directly to the community at local One-Stop Career Centers.[5]

Flexible scheduling. Besides offering more courses on evenings and weekends, another option to create flexible scheduling is to offer self-paced open-entry/open-exit courses in which participants work at their own speed and complete as much of a program as possible outside the traditional semester or quarter system. Although this approach has financial aid implications, some colleges have found ways to offer flexible scheduling options so that students still qualify for financial assistance. Riverside Community College in California offers its New Visions program for low-income working students at several different time slots throughout the week, and participants can switch between slots as needed, if their work schedules change or other conflicts arise.[6] Portland Community College's Machinist Training Institute offers its entire associate's degree program in a self-paced open-entry/open-exit format, by means of laboratory instructors who are available to students working independently.

Creating Lifelong Learning Opportunities and Career Pathways

For many low-wage workers, attending college continuously for several years in order to complete a degree or certificate program may not be realistic, given the competing demands on their time. Many of the current and former students in the focus groups did not attend college continuously, and some took much longer than expected to complete their program. Likewise, some of the potential students expressed an interest in seeing the rewards from attending college

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[5] As noted in Chapter 6, the Workforce Investment Act of 1998 called for the creation of a nationwide system of One-Stop Career Centers to integrate more than a dozen federal employment and training programs, as well as state and local services, in one centralized location. For more information, see National Governors Association Center for Best Practices (1998).

[6] Golonka and Matus-Grossman, 2001.

at earlier benchmark periods, rather than waiting until graduation. Creating lifelong learning opportunities and clear career pathways could be one approach to providing education and career advancement opportunities to low-wage working students, outside the traditional degree and certificate formats. Such programs delineate different short-term training options or single courses in a particular career area, and relevant job opportunities are connected to each "rung" in the career ladder; students can enter or exit at multiple points and can return for additional education, building toward traditional college credentials.[7] Portland Community College has created career pathway programs in several fields, including telecommunications, health care, and high technology.[8] Program specifics vary, but all include employer partnerships that allow employees to return to college and take additional courses toward higher career objectives and education credentials. In partnership with other colleges and universities, Portland has also mapped out pathways to attain a bachelor's or higher degree.

LaGuardia Community College is entering a partnership with the New York City Health and Hospitals Corporation (NYCHHC) to provide training for incumbent workers in the health field, to address an enormous labor shortage and create new advancement opportunities for low-wage employees. LaGuardia will supply the instruction — including customized training and college preparatory courses — while NYCHHC will pay for employees' tuition and provide release time. Employees will be able to train for advancement to the position of Licensed Practical Nurse through the program, and LaGuardia is considering accelerating the existing program, integrating occupational and remedial skills into it, and combining on-site courses in the workplace with laboratory courses on campus.

Short-term training programs can easily be adapted to fit a longer career pathway. For example, Macomb Community College's Machinist Training Institute offers trainees the opportunity to earn a machinist's certificate in a relatively short time (16 weeks) as they also earn credit toward a higher credential, should they return for more education.

Finally, the California Community Colleges Board of Governors is considering pilot-testing an initiative to develop career ladder programs statewide, based on some existing local models that include partnerships among colleges, private employers, and community-based organizations. The programs would offer job training in high-growth fields, case management and other support services, and job placements as participants progress up their career ladders.[9]

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[7]Career ladder approaches can be difficult to implement and bring to scale, however, given their complexity and the number of partnerships involved. Fitzgerald and Carlson (2000) discuss obstacles to career ladder implementation and give additional examples of programs.

[8]Other career pathway programs include the Job Ladder partnership model created at Shoreline Community College in Washington State (see Golonka and Matus-Grossman, 2001, p. 19).

[9]Board of Governors, 2001.

Upgrading Noncredit Remedial Courses

Many low-wage working students lack a high school diploma or GED and cannot meet entry requirements for degree or certificate programs. Students in these circumstances often have to take noncredit remedial and GED courses to build their skills in order to qualify for degree and certificate programs.[10] Yet these noncredit courses can have second-class status on campus — and high attrition rates. Some colleges give credit for remedial courses; at Sinclair Community College, for example, the developmental program is offered for institutional credit so that students can receive financial aid, even though the credits do not count toward degree requirements.

Efforts could also be made to bolster the quality of instruction in noncredit, or "bridge," courses and to create incentives that induce students to persevere — such as retroactive credit for meeting certain thresholds and advancing to related credit courses, which will help students transition smoothly to degree and certificate programs. LaGuardia Community College offers a "credit banking" option to noncredit students in computer courses who then transfer to the credit program; they can receive credits retroactively for noncredit coursework completed that is relevant to their program. The college also offers a preparatory program for noncredit students of English as a Second Language (ESL), to encourage better access to credit enrollment. Students participate in workshops and receive one-on-one advisement on exploring higher education options.

Cabrillo College, through the local Ladders Project initiative, is pilot-testing a bridge program for adults whose proficiency in English language skills is too low to enter existing Vocational English as a Second Language (VESL) programs that require moderate proficiency. The pilot program combines beginning ESL work with vocational skills training in several occupational areas, including health care, office work, and careers with children. Graduates will be prepared for higher-level VESL programs as well as entry-level work in their field of choice. Another example is found at Sinclair Community College, which has merged developmental math and engineering instruction into one course that provides students with credit toward both developmental and degree requirements.

Financial Aid for Low-Wage Working Students

Financial aid access and eligibility and insufficient income were major concerns expressed by focus group participants. Given that individual participants across all three groups

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[10] This finding is supported by literature on the need for remediation (for example, McCabe, 2000) and by suggestions for better connecting remediation with academic or occupational instruction (Grubb, 2001a).

reported not being eligible for federal financial aid because they exceeded income guidelines, were enrolled as less-than-half-time students, or owed monies on previous federal grants or loans, policy approaches could include the following suggestions.

Creating or Expanding Financial Aid Targeted to Low-Wage Working Students

Federal aid for low-wage working students could be considered in the upcoming reauthorization of the Higher Education Act. Individual colleges could also work with state governments and other public or private partners to experiment with offering new forms of tuition assistance and financial incentives for adult working students, including the use of training stipends to compensate for reduced work hours and to cover some living expenses as well as tuition. For example, two states (Illinois and Vermont) already offer financial aid targeted to students who are enrolled less than half time, and other states have part-time or general programs for which less-than-half-time students would qualify.[11] In Dayton, Ohio, Sinclair Community College is pilot-testing the Access to Better Jobs program, which provides credit-granting short-term training for low-wage workers and includes books, tuition, and support services. The program uses state welfare funds that are administered through the local Workforce Investment Board.[12]

Expanding Federal and State Work-Study Programs

Another idea is to expand the federal work-study program so that it would offer paid employment and internship opportunities with local private employers on or off campus. An expanded program could provide higher wages and the option of additional work hours for adult students, whose needs are very different from those of traditional, younger students for whom the program was designed. Moreover, the federal program is limited to on-campus or off-campus placements with nonprofit employers, whereas older working students may be interested in career-relevant placements with private employers. California and Kentucky offer one model with their state-funded work-study programs for TANF recipients, which allow placements with private employers. The California version, through the community college system's CalWORKs program, supplements the amount budgeted for work-study stipends with a requirement that on- or off-campus employers of participating students contribute at least 25 percent of their work-study wages. Expanded work-study programs could provide supportive and

[11] Bosworth and Choitz, 2002.

[12] Ohio's Prevention, Retention and Contingency program was set up to prevent low-income families from needing cash assistance, and a portion of the funding is available to support innovative local programs.

flexible employment placements that enable adult students to combine college and work and thus gain temporary assistance with living expenses while matriculating.

Adopting Other Approaches Suggested by the Focus Groups

Along with creating new forms of financial aid for low-wage working students, many focus group participants expressed the need for outreach services to provide information about existing financial aid options that are targeted to specific groups of students. Other ideas from the focus groups included creating tax breaks for low-income workers to encourage postsecondary education, deferred billing options, and financial assistance so that working students could purchase or lease computers, subscribe to Internet service at home, and take advantage of distance learning opportunities.[13]

Creative Public and Private Partnerships

Although the previous suggestions for promoting access to community college and fostering program completion focus on taking educational approaches via community colleges, given the broad range of barriers that low-income working students face, solutions will clearly involve other institutions. In order to best achieve recruitment and retention goals, other public sector organizations need to appropriately address such issues as labor market discrimination and domestic violence, which significantly reduce the opportunity for individuals to succeed. The task of recruiting, enrolling, and retaining low-wage workers will necessarily extend beyond the walls of community colleges.

One big issue for colleges in implementing many of the ideas listed above is securing sufficient financial resources. At all the Opening Doors colleges, administrators explained that while there was a need to expand existing academic or personal support services, these were not traditionally well-funded areas. Community college resources are largely tied to delivering education and training, not to providing support services. The budgets are also often based on formulas involving full-time equivalents (FTEs), which do not count part-time students as individuals and can thus underrepresent their service needs. While colleges and state postsecondary systems may want to consider institutionalizing new resources for academic and personal support services, given the diverse needs of their student populations and the high attrition rates of both traditional and nontraditional students, some of these efforts could potentially be funded through partnerships with outside public or private organizations.

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[13]Several tax credits are available to support education, including the Hope Scholarship and the Lifetime Learning Tax Credit. See Bosworth and Choitz (2002) for explanations of why both programs are poorly suited for low-income working students, along with recommendations for improving the programs' accessibility.

The following examples illustrate ways in which colleges, public agencies, community-based organizations, and employers can form partnerships to merge their resources and expand educational services to low-wage workers.[14]

Locating agency staff and services on campus. Colleges could invite local welfare, workforce development, and other agencies to locate staff on their campuses, to ease scheduling appointments and transportation issues for students who are clients of these agencies. Agency staff could also receive formal or informal training from the college about education-related issues, to help them better advise clients about combining college with their other responsibilities (for example, welfare regulations about work requirements or time limits). Cabrillo College's Fast Track to Work program hosts several eligibility workers from the county welfare agency, and students on welfare are usually assigned to these workers for case management. Likewise, Portland Community College hosts several workforce development One-Stop Career Centers on its campuses, which is convenient for clients who are students and may also attract other clients (potential students) to the college and its programs.

Offering postsecondary courses and services in the community. Besides bringing outside agency staff to their students, colleges can also go out into the community and bring courses and services directly to potential students, in their neighborhoods. Macomb Community College does this through its continuing education program, which offers courses at numerous off-campus community locations, including neighborhood K-12 schools. While these are often noncredit courses and are not directly linked to credentialing programs, the approach offers a model that can be extended to offer credit-granting programs in the community as well.

Cabrillo College's Fast Track to Work program outstations college staff at the local One-Stop Career Centers, where both welfare and workforce development clients can receive assistance in applying for college, get information about Fast Track, or access other services. Likewise, Sinclair Community College has placed staff in the local Job Center (a One-Stop Career Center) to provide services to workforce development clients.

Offering courses at employers' job sites is another community-based approach. LaGuardia Community College, for example, participates in the Direct Care Certificate Program developed by the City University of New York; courses are offered on-site for incumbent employees of local agencies that serve developmentally disabled clients. Students earn 12 credits and the college's Human Services Certificate. An additional noncredit, occupation-related

[14]Roberts (2002) provides additional examples of partnerships between community colleges and community-based organizations as well as strategies for building new partnerships.

bridge program is offered at the college for employees who need remediation. Participating employers have agreed to tie course completion to salary increases and promotion opportunities.[15]

Coordinating services across partner organizations. Finally, whether programs are college- or community-based, multiple partners can coordinate services and resources to expand current program and support offerings to low-wage workers. Colleges are not necessarily well suited to provide all needed support services, nor are public agencies or employers best suited to provide education and training. By combining forces, partnerships can reduce duplication of services and offer targeted assistance to low-wage workers or other low-income students. Multiple permutations are possible. For example, in a career pathway program, colleges could provide instruction and academic support services such as remediation and tutoring; community partners provide child care, financial assistance, and personal counseling; and employers could provide tuition reimbursement and job placement opportunities for program graduates. Several Information Technology Career Pathways programs in California serve as models: Colleges provide training; community-based organizations offer support services; and local employers agree to place graduates.[16] Several Opening Doors colleges have built successful partnerships with public or private organizations in their communities. LaGuardia Community College's public-private partnership with NYCHHC will create new career ladder opportunities for incumbent low-wage health care workers. Valencia Community College has partnered with a local school district to offer credentialing opportunities to incumbent teachers' aides, including partial tuition reimbursement, courses scheduled to fit teaching schedules, and an agreement with a local university to instruct higher-level teaching classes on Valencia's campus. Sinclair Community College's Access to Better Jobs and Cabrillo College's Fast Track to Work programs utilize public agency funds to provide expanded services to students. Likewise, Macomb Community College's Machinist Training Institute is funded by the local Workforce Development Board, whose One-Stop Career Centers also provide case management and other support services for clients who participate.

Student Support Service Approaches

Working with public and private partners may allow community colleges to provide an expanded menu of student services to attract and retain low-wage workers and other students. Following are some examples of strategies based on student support services.

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[15]Some research suggests that such approaches can increase career advancement opportunities for participants. See Krueger and Rouse (1998) for an evaluation of two additional workplace education programs whereby community colleges provided adult education instruction to incumbent workers at their job sites.

[16]For more information, see http://www.workforcestrategy.org/itcareerpathwayinitiatives.html.

Aggressive Outreach and Marketing: Closing the Information Gap

By and large, the focus group participants did not believe that their local colleges were actively recruiting them to attend, and many of the potential students were unsure what steps they needed to take to enroll.[17] Participants in one focus group also talked about preferring a more personalized approach to recruitment, saying that direct-mail materials should address them by name, not "Current Resident." Marketing efforts that are aimed at expanding outreach and targeting nontraditional student groups specifically could lead more low-wage workers to the college doorstep. Macomb Community College plans to launch a recruitment effort targeted at low-wage workers, and marketing materials will be tailored to the specific needs of this group.

Another way to locate and reach potential students is to use their existing social networks and support systems. Rather than targeting just individual parents, for example, Portland Community College has involved entire families of welfare recipients and other target populations in weekend and evening programs. Such recruitment efforts not only could bring potential students to the college but also could bring college information to community locations — including, but not limited to, the job sites of low-wage workers, the community-based organizations and public agencies that serve them, and that schools that teach their children. Many colleges already try to reach and recruit children while they are still in the K-12 education system, and some are using children as a conduit to reach their parents.[18] The value of using existing networks is illustrated by one former student in the focus groups, who described having found out about her local college's special programs and services for welfare recipients through a flier that accompanied her TANF check.

Finally, the focus groups in the Opening Doors study demonstrate that colleges' outreach efforts should include information not only about admissions and program specifics but also about the services and financial assistance that are available to potential students who enroll.

Student Support Centers

To address the need for greater access to counseling services that fit the busy schedules of low-wage working students, one demonstration idea involves creating "one-stop" support service centers on college campuses, by designing new services and improving existing support structures. Colleges could work in concert with local welfare and workforce development agencies to address students' academic, personal, financial, employment, counseling, and child care

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[17]Phone interview results (Appendix Table A.1) show that most participants did not believe that they were actively recruited by their local community college.

[18]Valencia Community College, for example, has over 30 grade-level outreach and recruitment programs targeted to K-12 students.

needs. Such a program could be modeled on the Fast Track to Work program at Cabrillo College and similar programs at other colleges (such as Academics in Motion at Valencia Community College, Access to Better Jobs at Sinclair Community College, and the College Opportunity to Prepare for Employment [COPE] program at LaGuardia Community College).

On-campus support centers could give students additional one-on-one help in navigating the college system, in getting assistance with personal problems, and in dealing with external agencies. Such a program could target low-wage workers directly or indirectly, by targeting other student groups that may overlap, such as parents, first-generation students, women and minority groups, low-income students, reentry students, and TANF or WIA recipients. To avoid stigmatizing any particular groups, services could be made available to all students.

Colleges can also streamline existing services. LaGuardia Community College plans to pilot-test this approach by training its financial aid, registration, and admissions staff to answer basic questions in all three areas while "experts" in each area would be available for more difficult questions or situations. Likewise, when different services are offered on different campuses — which is often the case with "special programs" — but there appears to be similar demand for those services on other campuses, the services could be expanded to additional locations.

Colleges can also provide opportunities for students to prepare themselves for the college experience and for meeting course and graduation requirements. Valencia Community College offers a Student Success course, for credit, to help new students make the transition to college, develop study skills, and establish an education plan. Finally, colleges can provide opportunities for students to support each other and share information and resources. Examples include LaGuardia Community College's learning communities, which form natural cohorts of students who move through pairs or clusters of courses together. Another approach is used at Valencia Community College, which offers a peer mentoring program on one of its campuses.

On-Site Child Care

Participants in the focus groups clearly articulated that increasing the availability of high-quality child care (including infant care and teen enrichment programs) on college campuses — especially during the evening and weekends, when many working students go to class — is another effective support service approach. Participants also expressed interest in flexible, drop-in programs where they could take their children in and out of the care center as class and work schedules demanded. For older preschool- and school-age children, perhaps offering children's educational or recreational activities on evenings and weekends would help address parents' concerns; examples include locating a 4-H program on campus or offering Boy Scout or Girl Scout activities, karate, dance, or a science club. Parents may feel more comfortable knowing that their child — rather than just being in care — is participating in a typical after-school

activity. Children may be excited about attending such activities, and community colleges may be able to develop partnerships with community-based providers to expand existing child care offerings on campus or to provide care at a nearby location. Cabrillo College and other California colleges have been able to offer welfare recipients child care vouchers and assistance through the community college system's CalWORKs program. Another approach could be to build peer networks that center on child care, since many students are preparing for employment as care providers and others are seeking care placements for their children.

Providing a Welcoming, Nondiscriminatory Learning Environment

Some participants across all three types of focus groups encountered discrimination in their community college experiences. Programs that traditionally attract one gender more than the other — such as nursing, early childhood education, automotive maintenance, and machinist — could look for ways to foster a welcoming, inclusive environment for both females and males. If welding training, for example, is offered to everyone but all safety supplies such as goggles and gloves are stocked only in large sizes, female students may not feel welcome. No student should be discouraged from participating in any program because of age, gender, race/ethnicity, or family status.

In a working paper that examined the importance of faculty diversity in community colleges, the researchers found that a welcoming learning environment is fostered by faculty who have the skills to work with all kinds of students. This may be accomplished through diversity-oriented professional development of faculty, high-level leadership on campus regarding diversity issues, and including diversity measures in evaluations of faculty.[19]

There also could be on-campus supports for students who encounter unwelcoming classroom environments. Adult reentry programs are welcoming places for returning adult students at many colleges; students at both Cabrillo College and Sinclair Community College described the staff at the reentry programs as playing a pivotal role in helping them feel comfortable among younger students. Likewise, students at Portland Community College talked about the Women's Center as being a welcoming place to find information, connect with other students, and generally access support.

The focus group participants also discussed discriminatory practices of employers and public agencies. Community colleges could work with employers to promote equal employment opportunity partnerships, and they also could assist students in dealing with discrimination by providing on-campus supports, such as counseling and information and referral services.

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[19]California Tomorrow, 2002.

Conclusion

The Opening Doors study provides important insights about low-wage workers' knowledge about and experiences with community college programs and services. Many of the findings and strategies illustrated in this report corroborate other research on community college students. The policies and strategies described in this chapter should be carefully evaluated to determine their effects on community college access, retention, and completion rates and on low-wage working students' employment, and earnings during and after postsecondary education.

The findings from this report have implications for the upcoming national debates over reauthorization of legislation affecting welfare and higher education; there will certainly be dialogue about whether or not to expand the current postsecondary education and training options under the federal welfare legislation. As the Opening Doors study indicates, these debates should also explore the barriers that welfare recipients and other low-wage workers face in accessing and completing college programs.

While many low-wage working students are already succeeding in postsecondary education — thanks to the efforts of community colleges like those in the Opening Doors study — other current and former students in the study described barriers to completing their programs that colleges and public or private partners could address. Likewise, some potential students among the low-wage labor force are interested in attending college but lack the basic information and financial resources to make that possible. Although no single overriding barrier prevents low-wage workers from accessing and completing community college, the strategies to address multiple barriers described in this chapter — based on educational, financial aid, partnership, and student support service approaches — may hold great promise for enrolling and graduating larger numbers of low-wage working parents.

Appendix A

Selected Results from Phone Interviews with Focus Group Participants

In addition to the written demographic surveys administered at the focus group sessions, participants were asked to complete an individual, follow-up telephone interview. Phone interviews were conducted four to six weeks after the focus group discussions and were used to collect individual data regarding topics such as economic well-being, which participants might not have wished to disclose in a focus group setting. The phone interviews were an hour in length, on average, and followed a structured protocol. Participants who completed phone interviews received a $25 gift certificate as an incentive. Appendix Table A.1 provides selected results from these interviews. Of the 131 focus group participants, only 96 were reached and agreed to be interviewed by telephone. The responses presented in Table A.1 are those of the 71 current and former students who were interviewed. Responses from the potential students in the focus groups were excluded from this table because too few individuals (54 percent) participated in the phone survey.

Opening Doors to Earning Credentials

Appendix Table A.1

Selected Results from Phone Interviews with Focus Group Participants

	Current Students	Former Students
College Time Line		
First attended this community college[a] (%)		
Within the past 2 years	9.8	0.0
2-5 years ago	58.5	57.1
More than 5 years ago	31.7	42.9
Last attended this community college[ab] (%)		
Within the past 2 years	NA	7.1
2-5 years ago	NA	82.1
More than 5 years ago	NA	10.7
Attended continuously or took time off[c] (%)		
Continuously	63.4	53.6
Took time off	36.6	46.4
Ever considered droppping out of college[d] (%)		
Yes	46.5	NA
No	53.5	NA
Main reason for considering dropping out/leaving/not going to college[ef] (%)		
Too expensive	35.0	17.9
Did not like school, teachers, or program[g]	5.0	7.7
Poor grades or language/skills problems[h]	5.0	7.7
Pregnancy[i]	10.0	7.7
Family or personal reasons	20.0	10.3
Health problems of self or other	0.0	10.3
Transportation problems	0.0	0.0
Child care problems	0.0	10.3
Work-related reasons	5.0	20.5
Housing problem	5.0	0.0
Time-management problems	5.0	2.6
Other reason	10.0	2.6
Plan to attend an additional education program in the future (%)	94.6	85.7
Missing (%)	14.0	<5.0
Of those with future education plans, those who . . .		
plan to attend a community college (%)	NA	75.0
plan to attend a four-year college (%)	80.0	4.2
plan to attend a vocational, trade or business school (%)	2.9	12.5
Recruitment/Admissions		
Believed they were recruited by the community college (%)	18.6	14.3

(continued)

Appendix Table A.1 (continued)

	Current Students	Former Students
Level of ease/difficulty in applying to/enrolling in community college (%)		
Easy (1)	51.2	60.7
2	23.3	21.4
3	16.3	10.7
4	2.3	3.6
Difficult (5)	7.0	3.6
Family and Peer Experiences with College		
Family member(s) attended college or other post-high school education or training program (%)	76.7	78.6
Number of friends who have gone to college (%)		
Most	25.6	37.0
Some	62.8	51.9
None	11.6	11.1
Schedule		
Time of day when students take/would take classes (%)		
Morning	72.1	75.0
Afternoon	48.8	50.0
Evening	60.5	39.3
Weekend	14.0	7.1
Computer Access		
Have a computer at home (%)	81.4	57.1
Do not own but have access to a computer (%)	87.5	83.3
Missing (%)	12.5	8.3
Financial Aid		
Applied for a Pell Grant (%)	90.7	64.3
Applicants who received a Pell Grant (%)	82.1	88.9
Applied for a student loan (%)	48.8	17.9
Applicants who received a student loan (%)	61.9	80.0
Applied for work study[c] (%)	48.8	NA
Applicants who received work study (%)	38.1	NA
Other Sources of Financial Support		
Use/would use personal savings to support going to college (%)	40.5	46.4
Use/would use financial support from family to support going to college (%)	39.5	25.0
Received/would use support from the welfare or TANF program to support going to college (%)	23.8	18.5
Received/would use employer tuition reimbursement to support going to college (%)	4.8	18.5

(continued)

Appendix Table A.1 (continued)

	Current Students	Former Students
Received/would use other financial support to support going to college (%)	22.5	45.8
Missing (%)	7.0	14.3
College Costs		
Out-of-pocket costs for tuition		
$0-$100	74.4	77.8
$101-$150	0.0	3.7
$151-$250	4.7	0.0
more than $250	20.9	11.1
Out-of-pocket costs for books		
$0-$100	76.7	88.9
$101-$150	7.0	3.7
$151-$250	11.6	3.7
more than $250	4.7	3.7
Key College Support Services and Needs		
While in college, ever needed help with . . .		
brushing up on math, reading, or writing skills (%)	62.8	71.4
academic counseling (%)	86.0	78.6
personal problems (%)	48.8	42.9
health problems (%)	30.8	16.7
Missing (%)	9.3	14.3
child care arrangements (%)	46.5	46.4
child care costs (%)	46.5	50.0
transportation (%)	41.9	32.1
paying for housing (%)	32.6	39.3
finding a job or internship (%)	48.8	35.7
If enrolled in college, would need help with . . .		
brushing up on math, reading, and writing skills (%)	NA	64.3
academic counseling (%)	NA	81.5
personal problems (%)	NA	42.3
Missing (%)	NA	7.1
health problems (%)	NA	17.9
child care arrangements (%)	NA	46.4
child care costs (%)	NA	42.9
transportation (%)	NA	14.3
paying for housing (%)	NA	18.5
finding a job or internship (%)	NA	50.0
Sample size = 71	43	28
Response rate (%)	86.0	80.0

(continued)

Appendix Table A.1 (continued)

SOURCE: MDRC calculations based on phone-interview surveys with Opening Doors focus group participants.

NOTES: Nonresponses for the items in which the nonresponse rate for all specific characteristics was 5 percent or higher across the three groups are shown as "missing." The nonresponses for all other items were excluded from the calculations.

[a]Participants were asked when they first and last attended one of the Opening Doors colleges (Cabrillo, LaGuardia, Macomb, Portland, Sinclair, and Valencia), not the first or last time they had attended any college.

[b]This question was asked of former students only.

[c]Time off was defined as time taken off from regular semesters and excluded time taken off for the summer.

[d]This question was asked of current students only.

[e]Of the current students interviewed, only those who had considered dropping out of college were asked this question. The question was modified for the other groups, with former and current students being asked what was their main reason for leaving college and what was their main reason for never attending college, respectively.

[f]When multiple reasons were given, each response was counted as discrete. This accounts for the total number of responses exceeding the number of respondents for this category.

[g]Former and current students were asked whether the program did not achieve their career goal or whether they were not interested in attending college, respectively.

[h]Potential students in this category answered that they had language/skill problems rather than low grades.

[i]Potential students were asked whether either pregnancy or having children was their main reason for never attending college.

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Recent Publications on MDRC Projects

Note: For works not published by MDRC, the publisher's name is shown in parentheses. With a few exceptions, this list includes reports published by MDRC since 1999. A complete publications list is available from MDRC and on its Web site (www.mdrc.org), from which copies of MDRC's publications can also be downloaded.

Career Advancement and Wage Progression

Opening Doors to Earning Credentials

An exploration of strategies for increasing low-wage workers' access to and completion of community college programs.

Opening Doors: Expanding Educational Opportunities for Low-Income Workers. 2001. Susan Golonka, Lisa Matus-Grossman.

Welfare Reform and Community Colleges: A Policy and Research Context. 2002. Thomas Brock, Lisa Matus-Grossman, Gayle Hamilton.

Opening Doors: Students' Perspectives on Juggling Work, Family and College. 2002. Lisa Matus-Grossman, Susan Gooden.

Reforming Welfare and Making Work Pay

Next Generation Project

A collaboration among researchers at MDRC and several other leading research institutions focused on studying the effects of welfare, antipoverty, and employment policies on children and families.

How Welfare and Work Policies Affect Children: A Synthesis of Research. 2001. Pamela Morris, Aletha Huston, Greg Duncan, Danielle Crosby, Johannes Bos.

How Welfare and Work Policies Affect Employment and Income: A Synthesis of Research. 2001. Dan Bloom, Charles Michalopoulos.

How Welfare and Work Policies for Parents Affect Adolescents: A Synthesis of Research. 2002. Lisa A. Gennetian, Greg J. Duncan, Virginia W. Knox, Wanda G. Vargas, Elizabeth Clark-Kauffman, Andrew S. London.

ReWORKing Welfare: Technical Assistance for States and Localities

A multifaceted effort to assist states and localities in designing and implementing their welfare reform programs. The project includes a series of "how-to" guides, conferences, briefings, and customized, in-depth technical assistance.

After AFDC: Welfare-to-Work Choices and Challenges for States. 1997. Dan Bloom.

Work First: How to Implement an Employment-Focused Approach to Welfare Reform. 1997. Amy Brown.

Business Partnerships: How to Involve Employers in Welfare Reform. 1998. Amy Brown, Maria Buck, Erik Skinner.

Promoting Participation: How to Increase Involvement in Welfare-to-Work Activities. 1999. Gayle Hamilton, Susan Scrivener.

Encouraging Work, Reducing Poverty: The Impact of Work Incentive Programs. 2000. Gordon Berlin.

Steady Work and Better Jobs: How to Help Low-Income Parents Sustain Employment and Advance in the Workforce. 2000. Julie Strawn, Karin Martinson.

Beyond Work First: How to Help Hard-to-Employ Individuals Get Jobs and Succeed in the Workforce. 2001. Amy Brown.

Project on Devolution and Urban Change

A multi-year study in four major urban counties — Cuyahoga County, Ohio (which includes the city of Cleveland), Los Angeles, Miami-Dade, and Philadelphia — that examines how welfare reforms are being implemented and affect poor people, their neighborhoods, and the institutions that serve them.

Big Cities and Welfare Reform: Early Implementation and Ethnographic Findings from the Project on Devolution and Urban Change. 1999. Janet Quint, Kathryn Edin, Maria Buck, Barbara Fink, Yolanda Padilla, Olis Simmons-Hewitt, Mary Valmont.

Food Security and Hunger in Poor, Mother-Headed Families in Four U.S. Cities. 2000. Denise Polit, Andrew London, John Martinez.

Assessing the Impact of Welfare Reform on Urban Communities: The Urban Change Project and Methodological Considerations. 2000. Charles Michalopoulos, Johannes Bos, Robert Lalonde, Nandita Verma.

Post-TANF Food Stamp and Medicaid Benefits: Factors That Aid or Impede Their Receipt. 2001. Janet Quint, Rebecca Widom.

Social Service Organizations and Welfare Reform. 2001. Barbara Fink, Rebecca Widom.

Monitoring Outcomes for Cuyahoga County's Welfare Leavers: How Are They Faring? 2001. Nandita Verma, Claudia Coulton.

The Health of Poor Urban Women: Findings from the Project on Devolution and Urban Change. 2001. Denise Polit, Andrew London, John Martinez.

Is Work Enough? The Experiences of Current and Former Welfare Mothers Who Work. 2001. Denise Polit, Rebecca Widom, Kathryn Edin, Stan Bowie, Andrew London, Ellen Scott, Abel Valenzuela.

Readying Welfare Recipients for Work: Lessons from Four Big Cities as They Implement Welfare Reform. 2002. Thomas Brock, Laura Nelson, Megan Reiter.

Wisconsin Works

This study examines how Wisconsin's welfare-to-work program, one of the first to end welfare as an entitlement, is administered in Milwaukee.

Complaint Resolution in the Context of Welfare Reform: How W-2 Settles Disputes. 2001. Suzanne Lynn.

Exceptions to the Rule: The Implementation of 24-Month Time-Limit Extensions in W-2. 2001. Susan Gooden, Fred Doolittle.

Matching Applicants with Services: Initial Assessments in the Milwaukee County W-2 Program. 2001. Susan Gooden, Fred Doolittle, Ben Glispie.

Time Limits

Florida's Family Transition Program

An evaluation of Florida's initial time-limited welfare program, which includes services, requirements, and financial work incentives intended to reduce long-term welfare receipt and help welfare recipients find and keep jobs.

The Family Transition Program: Implementation and Three-Year Impacts of Florida's Initial Time-Limited Welfare Program. 1999. Dan Bloom, Mary Farrell, James Kemple, Nandita Verma.

The Family Transition Program: Final Report on Florida's Initial Time-Limited Welfare Program. 2000. Dan Bloom, James Kemple, Pamela Morris, Susan Scrivener, Nandita Verma, Richard Hendra.

Cross-State Study of Time-Limited Welfare

An examination of the implementation of some of the first state-initiated time-limited welfare programs.

Welfare Time Limits: An Interim Report Card. 1999. Dan Bloom.

Connecticut's Jobs First Program

An evaluation of Connecticut's statewide time-limited welfare program, which includes financial work incentives and requirements to participate in employment-related services aimed at rapid job placement. This study provides some of the earliest information on the effects of time limits in major urban areas.

Connecticut Post-Time Limit Tracking Study: Six-Month Survey Results. 1999. Jo Anna Hunter-Manns, Dan Bloom.

Jobs First: Implementation and Early Impacts of Connecticut's Welfare Reform Initiative. 2000. Dan Bloom, Laura Melton, Charles Michalopoulos, Susan Scrivener, Johanna Walter.

Connecticut's Jobs First Program: An Analysis of Welfare Leavers. 2000. Laura Melton, Dan Bloom.

Final Report on Connecticut's Welfare Reform Initiative. 2002. Dan Bloom, Susan Scrivener, Charles Michalopoulos, Pamela Morris, Richard Hendra, Diana Adams-Ciardullo, Johanna Walter.

Vermont's Welfare Restructuring Project

An evaluation of Vermont's statewide welfare reform program, which includes a work requirement after a certain period of welfare receipt, and financial work incentives.

Forty-Two Month Impacts of Vermont's Welfare Restructuring Project. 1999. Richard Hendra, Charles Michalopoulos.

WRP: Key Findings from the Forty-Two-Month Client Survey. 2000. Dan Bloom, Richard Hendra, Charles Michalopoulos.

Financial Incentives

Encouraging Work, Reducing Poverty: The Impact of Work Incentive Programs. 2000. Gordon Berlin.

Minnesota Family Investment Program

An evaluation of Minnesota's pilot welfare reform initiative, which aims to encourage work, alleviate poverty, and reduce welfare dependence.

Reforming Welfare and Rewarding Work: Final Report on the Minnesota Family Investment Program. 2000:

Volume 1: Effects on Adults. Cynthia Miller, Virginia Knox, Lisa Gennetian, Martey Dodoo, Jo Anna Hunter, Cindy Redcross.

Volume 2: Effects on Children. Lisa Gennetian, Cynthia Miller.

Reforming Welfare and Rewarding Work: A Summary of the Final Report on the Minnesota Family Investment Program. 2000. Virginia Knox, Cynthia Miller, Lisa Gennetian.

Final Report on the Implementation and Impacts of the Minnesota Family Investment Program in Ramsey County. 2000. Patricia Auspos, Cynthia Miller, Jo Anna Hunter.

New Hope Project

A test of a community-based, work-focused antipoverty program and welfare alternative operating in Milwaukee.

New Hope for People with Low Incomes: Two-Year Results of a Program to Reduce Poverty and Reform Welfare. 1999. Johannes Bos, Aletha Huston, Robert Granger, Greg Duncan, Thomas Brock, Vonnie McLoyd.

Canada's Self-Sufficiency Project

A test of the effectiveness of a temporary earnings supplement on the employment and welfare receipt of public assistance recipients. Reports on the Self-Sufficiency Project are available from: Social Research and Demonstration Corporation (SRDC), 275 Slater St., Suite 900, Ottawa, Ontario K1P 5H9, Canada. Tel.: 613-237-4311; Fax: 613-237-5045. In the United States, the reports are also available from MDRC.

Does SSP Plus Increase Employment? The Effect of Adding Services to the Self-Sufficiency Project's Financial Incentives (SRDC). 1999. Gail Quets, Philip Robins, Elsie Pan, Charles Michalopoulos, David Card.

When Financial Work Incentives Pay for Themselves: Early Findings from the Self-Sufficiency Project's Applicant Study (SRDC). 1999. Charles Michalopoulos, Philip Robins, David Card.

The Self-Sufficiency Project at 36 Months: Effects of a Financial Work Incentive on Employment and Income (SRDC). 2000. Charles Michalopoulos, David Card, Lisa Gennetian, Kristen Harknett, Philip K. Robins.

The Self-Sufficiency Project at 36 Months: Effects on Children of a Program That Increased Parental Employment and Income (SRDC). 2000. Pamela Morris, Charles Michalopoulos.

When Financial Incentives Pay for Themselves: Interim Findings from the Self-Sufficiency Project's Applicant Study (SRDC). 2001. Charles Michalopoulos, Tracey Hoy.

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Mandatory Welfare Employment Programs

National Evaluation of Welfare-to-Work Strategies

Conceived and sponsored by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), with support from the U.S. Department of Education (ED), this is the largest-scale evaluation ever conducted of different strategies for moving people from welfare to employment.

Do Mandatory Welfare-to-Work Programs Affect the Well-Being of Children? A Synthesis of Child Research Conducted as Part of the National Evaluation of Welfare-to-Work Strategies (HHS/ED). 2000. Gayle Hamilton.

Evaluating Alternative Welfare-to-Work Approaches: Two-Year Impacts for Eleven Programs (HHS/ED). 2000. Stephen Freedman, Daniel Friedlander, Gayle Hamilton, JoAnn Rock, Marisa Mitchell, Jodi Nudelman, Amanda Schweder, Laura Storto.

Impacts on Young Children and Their Families Two Years After Enrollment: Findings from the Child Outcomes Study (HHS/ED). 2000. Sharon McGroder, Martha Zaslow, Kristin Moore, Suzanne LeMenestrel.

What Works Best for Whom: Impacts of 20 Welfare-to-Work Programs by Subgroup (HHS/ED). 2000. Charles Michalopoulos, Christine Schwartz.

Evaluating Two Approaches to Case Management: Implementation, Participation Patterns, Costs, and Three-Year Impacts of the Columbus Welfare-to-Work Program (HHS/ED). 2001. Susan Scrivener, Johanna Walter.

How Effective Are Different Welfare-to-Work Approaches? Five-Year Adult and Child Impacts for Eleven Programs– Executive Summary (HHS/ED). 2001. Gayle Hamilton, Stephen Freedman, Lisa Gennetian, Charles Michalopoulos, Johanna Walter, Diana Adams-Ciardullo, Anna Gassman-Pines, Sharon McGroder, Martha Zaslow, Surjeet Ahluwalia, Jennifer Brooks.

Los Angeles's Jobs-First GAIN Program

An evaluation of Los Angeles's refocused GAIN (welfare-to-work) program, which emphasizes rapid employment. This is the first in-depth study of a full-scale "work first" program in one of the nation's largest urban areas.

The Los Angeles Jobs-First GAIN Evaluation: First-Year Findings on Participation Patterns and Impacts. 1999. Stephen Freedman, Marisa Mitchell, David Navarro.

The Los Angeles Jobs-First GAIN Evaluation: Final Report on a Work First Program in a Major Urban Center. 2000. Stephen Freedman, Jean Knab, Lisa Gennetian, David Navarro.

Teen Parents on Welfare

Teenage Parent Programs: A Synthesis of the Long-Term Effects of the New Chance Demonstration, Ohio's Learning, Earning, and Parenting (LEAP) Program, and the Teenage Parent Demonstration (TPD). 1998. Robert Granger, Rachel Cytron.

Ohio's LEAP Program

An evaluation of Ohio's Learning, Earning, and Parenting (LEAP) Program, which uses financial incentives to encourage teenage parents on welfare to stay in or return to school.

LEAP: Final Report on Ohio's Welfare Initiative to Improve School Attendance Among Teenage Parents. 1997. Johannes Bos, Veronica Fellerath.

New Chance Demonstration

A test of a comprehensive program of services that seeks to improve the economic status and general well-being of a group of highly disadvantaged young women and their children.

New Chance: Final Report on a Comprehensive Program for Young Mothers in Poverty and Their Children. 1997. Janet Quint, Johannes Bos, Denise Polit.

Parenting Behavior in a Sample of Young Mothers in Poverty: Results of the New Chance Observational Study. 1998. Martha Zaslow, Carolyn Eldred, editors.

Focusing on Fathers

Parents' Fair Share Demonstration

A demonstration for unemployed noncustodial parents (usually fathers) of children on welfare. PFS aims to improve the men's employment and earnings, reduce child poverty by increasing child support payments, and assist the fathers in playing a broader constructive role in their children's lives.

Fathers' Fair Share: Helping Poor Men Manage Child Support and Fatherhood (Russell Sage Foundation). 1999. Earl Johnson, Ann Levine, Fred Doolittle.

Parenting and Providing: The Impact of Parents' Fair Share on Paternal Involvement. 2000. Virginia Knox, Cindy Redcross.

Working and Earning: The Impact of Parents' Fair Share on Low-Income Fathers' Employment. 2000. John M. Martinez, Cynthia Miller.

The Responsible Fatherhood Curriculum. 2000. Eileen Hayes, with Kay Sherwood.

The Challenge of Helping Low-Income Fathers Support Their Children: Final Lessons from Parents' Fair Share. 2001. Cynthia Miller, Virginia Knox

Education Reform

Accelerated Schools

This study examines the implementation and impacts on achievement of the Accelerated Schools model, a whole-school reform targeted at at-risk students.

Evaluating the Accelerated Schools Approach: A Look at Early Implementation and Impacts on Student Achievement in Eight Elementary Schools. 2001. Howard Bloom, Sandra Ham, Laura Melton, Julienne O'Brien.

Career Academies

The largest and most comprehensive evaluation of a school-to-work initiative, this study examines a promising approach to high school restructuring and the school-to-work transition.

Career Academies: Building Career Awareness and Work-Based Learning Activities Through Employer Partnerships. 1999. James Kemple, Susan Poglinco, Jason Snipes.

Career Academies: Impacts on Students' Engagement and Performance in High School. 2000. James Kemple, Jason Snipes.

Career Academies: Impacts on Students' Initial Transitions to Post-Secondary Education and Employment. 2001. James Kemple.

First Things First

This demonstration and research project looks at First Things First, a whole-school reform that combines a variety of best practices aimed at raising achievement and graduation rates in both urban and rural settings.

Scaling Up First Things First: Site Selection and the Planning Year. 2002. Janet Quint.

Project GRAD

This evaluation examines Project GRAD, an education initiative targeted at urban schools and combining a number of proven or promising reforms.

Building the Foundation for Improved Student Performance: The Pre-Curricular Phase of Project GRAD Newark. 2000. Sandra Ham, Fred Doolittle, Glee Ivory Holton.

LILAA Initiative

This study of the Literacy in Libraries Across America (LILAA) initiative explores the efforts of five adult literacy programs in public libraries to improve learner persistence.

So I Made Up My Mind: Introducing a Study of Adult Learner Persistence in Library Literacy Programs. 2000. John T. Comings, Sondra Cuban.

"I Did It for Myself": Studying Efforts to Increase Adult Learner Persistence in Library Literacy Programs. 2001. John Comings, Sondra Cuban, Johannes Bos, Catherine Taylor.

Toyota Families in Schools

A discussion of the factors that determine whether an impact analysis of a social program is feasible and warranted, using an evaluation of a new family literacy initiative as a case study.

An Evaluability Assessment of the Toyota Families in Schools Program. 2001. Janet Quint.

Project Transition

A demonstration program that tested a combination of school-based strategies to facilitate students' transition from middle school to high school.

Project Transition: Testing an Intervention to Help High School Freshmen Succeed. 1999. Janet Quint, Cynthia Miller, Jennifer Pastor, Rachel Cytron.

Equity 2000

Equity 2000 is a nationwide initiative sponsored by the College Board to improve low-income students' access to college. The MDRC paper examines the implementation of Equity 2000 in Milwaukee Public Schools.

Getting to the Right Algebra: The Equity 2000 Initiative in Milwaukee Public Schools. 1999. Sandra Ham, Erica Walker.

School-to-Work Project

A study of innovative programs that help students make the transition from school to work or careers.

Home-Grown Lessons: Innovative Programs Linking School and Work (Jossey-Bass Publishers). 1995. Edward Pauly, Hilary Kopp, Joshua Haimson.

Home-Grown Progress: The Evolution of Innovative School-to-Work Programs. 1997. Rachel Pedraza, Edward Pauly, Hilary Kopp.

Employment and Community Initiatives

Jobs-Plus Initiative

A multi-site effort to greatly increase employment among public housing residents.

Mobilizing Public Housing Communities for Work: Origins and Early Accomplishments of the Jobs-Plus Demonstration. 1999. James Riccio.

Building a Convincing Test of a Public Housing Employment Program Using Non-Experimental Methods: Planning for the Jobs-Plus Demonstration. 1999. Howard Bloom.

Jobs-Plus Site-by-Site: An Early Look at Program Implementation. 2000. Edited by Susan Philipson Bloom with Susan Blank.

Building New Partnerships for Employment: Collaboration Among Agencies and Public Housing Residents in the Jobs-Plus Demonstration. 2001. Linda Kato, James Riccio.

Neighborhood Jobs Initiative

An initiative to increase employment in a number of low-income communities.

The Neighborhood Jobs Initiative: An Early Report on the Vision and Challenges of Bringing an Employment Focus to a Community-Building Initiative. 2001. Frieda Molina, Laura Nelson.

Connections to Work Project

A study of local efforts to increase competition in the choice of providers of employment services for welfare recipients and other low-income populations. The project also provides assistance to cutting-edge local initiatives aimed at helping such people access and secure jobs.

Designing and Administering a Wage-Paying Community Service Employment Program Under TANF: Some Considerations and Choices. 1999. Kay Sherwood.

San Francisco Works: Toward an Employer-Led Approach to Welfare Reform and Workforce Development. 2000. Steven Bliss.

Canada's Earnings Supplement Project
A test of an innovative financial incentive intended to expedite the reemployment of displaced workers and encourage full-year work by seasonal or part-year workers, thereby also reducing receipt of Unemployment Insurance.

Testing a Re-employment Incentive for Displaced Workers: The Earnings Supplement Project. 1999. Howard Bloom, Saul Schwartz, Susanna Lui-Gurr, Suk-Won Lee.

MDRC Working Papers on Research Methodology

A new series of papers that explore alternative methods of examining the implementation and impacts of programs and policies.

Building a Convincing Test of a Public Housing Employment Program Using Non-Experimental Methods: Planning for the Jobs-Plus Demonstration. 1999. Howard Bloom.

Estimating Program Impacts on Student Achievement Using "Short" Interrupted Time Series. 1999. Howard Bloom.

Using Cluster Random Assignment to Measure Program Impacts: Statistical Implications for the Evaluation of Education Programs. 1999. Howard Bloom, Johannes Bos, Suk-Won Lee.

Measuring the Impacts of Whole School Reforms: Methodological Lessons from an Evaluation of Accelerated Schools. 2001. Howard Bloom.

The Politics of Random Assignment: Implementing Studies and Impacting Policy. 2000. Judith Gueron.

Modeling the Performance of Welfare-to-Work Programs: The Effects of Program Management and Services, Economic Environment, and Client Characteristics. 2001. Howard Bloom, Carolyn Hill, James Riccio.

A Regression-Based Strategy for Defining Subgroups in a Social Experiment. 2001. James Kemple, Jason Snipes.

Extending the Reach of Randomized Social Experiments: New Directions in Evaluations of American Welfare-to-Work and Employment Initiatives. 2001. James Riccio, Howard Bloom.

About MDRC

The Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation (MDRC) is a nonprofit, nonpartisan social policy research organization. We are dedicated to learning what works to improve the well-being of low-income people. Through our research and the active communication of our findings, we seek to enhance the effectiveness of social policies and programs. MDRC was founded in 1974 and is located in New York City and Oakland, California.

MDRC's current projects focus on welfare and economic security, education, and employment and community initiatives. Complementing our evaluations of a wide range of welfare reforms are new studies of supports for the working poor and emerging analyses of how programs affect children's development and their families' well-being. In the field of education, we are testing reforms aimed at improving the performance of public schools, especially in urban areas. Finally, our community projects are using innovative approaches to increase employment in low-income neighborhoods.

Our projects are a mix of demonstrations — field tests of promising program models — and evaluations of government and community initiatives, and we employ a wide range of methods to determine a program's effects, including large-scale studies, surveys, case studies, and ethnographies of individuals and families. We share the findings and lessons from our work — including best practices for program operators — with a broad audience within the policy and practitioner community, as well as the general public and the media.

Over the past quarter century, MDRC has worked in almost every state, all of the nation's largest cities, and Canada. We conduct our projects in partnership with state and local governments, the federal government, public school systems, community organizations, and numerous private philanthropies.

MDRC

16 East 34th Street
New York, NY 10016
(212) 532-3200

www.mdrc.org

475 14th Street
Oakland, CA 94612
(510) 663-6372

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